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SARAH THORNTON

SEVEN DAYS IN THE ART WORLD

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"An indelible portrait of a peculiar society." —*Vogue*

# SEVEN DAYS IN THE Art World



SARAH THORNTON  
with a new afterword

tion house staff members are also the most likely art world players to evoke romantic notions such as "genius" and "masterpiece" as part of their sales rhetoric.

Primary dealers, who represent artists, mount exhibitions of work fresh out of the studio, and attempt to build artists' careers, have tended to view the auctions as amoral and almost evil. As one put it, "Only two professions come to mind where the building in which transactions take place is referred to as a house." Secondary-market dealers, by contrast, have little to do with artists, work closely with the auction houses, and carefully play the sales.

Primary dealers usually try to avoid selling to people who will "flip" artworks at auction, so they don't lose control of their artists' prices. Although high values at auction may allow a primary dealer to raise the prices of an artist's current work, these monetary ranks can play havoc with the artist's career. Many perceive the auctions as the barometer of the art market. Artists may be in high demand when they have a solo show at a major museum; but three years later their work may fail to reach its reserve price and suffer the indignity of being "bought in" (the expression used when a work fails to sell). By publicizing the fact that people were willing to pay half a million dollars one year but not even a quarter of a million for a similar piece by the same artist the next, auctions exacerbate these harsh swings in taste. A record price breathes life into the perception of an artist's oeuvre, whereas a buy-in is like a visit from the grim reaper.

It's now 5:30 P.M. I'm supposed to be half a block away, interviewing an art consultant called Philippe Ségalot. I fly past Gil, Christie's much-loved doorman, through the revolving doors onto West Forty-ninth Street and manage to enter the café thirty

seconds ahead of my interviewee. Ségalot used to work at Christie's and now co-owns a powerful art consultancy called Giraud, Pissarro, Ségalot. He is the kind of player who, aided by the financial clout of his clients, can "make markets" for artists.

We both decide on fish carpaccio and sparkling water. Although Ségalot is wearing a conventional navy suit, his hair stands on end, thick with gel, neither in nor strictly out of fashion but in its own universe of style. Ségalot never studied art. He acquired an MBA, then worked in the marketing department of L'Oréal in Paris. As he explains, "It is not by chance that I went from cosmetics to art. We are dealing with beauty here. We are dealing in things that are unnecessary, dealing with abstractions."

Ségalot talks very quickly and passionately in intense French. He is a long-standing adviser to the self-made billionaire François Pinault, who, as both the owner of Christie's and a leading collector, wields a double-edged sword in the art market.\* When Pinault guarantees a work for Christie's, he either makes money on the sale or, if it's bought in, adds another piece to his collection. "François Pinault is my favorite collector," confesses Ségalot. "He has a true passion for contemporary art and a unique instinct for masterworks. He understands quality. He has an incredible eye." Building up the mystique of the collections on which you work is an essential part of a consultant's job. Any piece of art acquired by Pinault receives the value-added stamp of his provenance. The artist is the most important origin of a work, but the hands through which it passes are essential to the

\*In 2007, Pinault was ranked thirty-fourth in *Forbes's* list of world billionaires. He has many luxury goods holdings, including the brands Gucci, Yves St. Laurent, Sergio Rossi, Balenciaga, and Château Latour.

way in which it accrues value. As a matter of course, everyone involved in the art market talks up the provenances with which he or she is affiliated.

Pinault is one of twenty collectors that Ségalot and his partners work with on a regular basis. "The best situation in the art world—by far—is to be a collector," explains Ségalot. "The second-best situation is ours. We have people acquire the works that we would buy ourselves if we could afford them. We live with the works for a couple of days or weeks, but eventually they go, and that is an enormous satisfaction. In some cases we are very jealous, but it is our job to marry the right work to the right collector."

How does Ségalot know when he has encountered the right work? "You feel something," he says with fervor. "I never read about art. I'm not interested in the literature about art. I get all the art magazines, but I don't read them. I don't want to be influenced by the reviews. I look. I fill myself with images. It is not necessary to speak so much about art. I am convinced that a great work speaks for itself." A faith in gut instinct is common to most collectors, consultants, and dealers, and they love to talk about it. However, it is rare to find an art professional willing to admit that he doesn't read about art. It takes bravado. The vast majority of subscribers to art magazines do simply look at the pictures, and many collectors complain that art criticism, particularly that found in the dominant trade magazine, *Artforum*, is unreadable. Most consultants, however, pride themselves on their thorough research.

People who buy at auction say that there is nothing like it: "Your heart beats faster. The adrenaline surges through you. Even the coolest buyers break out in a sweat." If you bid in the room, you are part of the show, and if you buy, it's a public victory. In

auction-house parlance, you actually "win" works. Ségalot says he never gets nervous, but he does acknowledge a sense of sexual conquest: "Buying is very easy. It is much more difficult to resist the temptation to buy. You have to be selective and demanding, because buying is an extremely satisfying, macho act."

The psychology of buying is complex, if not perverse. Ségalot tells his clients, "The most expensive purchases—the purchases where you suffer the most—will turn out to be the best ones." Whether it is because of the intense competition or the financial stretch, there is something irresistible about art that is hard to get. Like love, it fuels desire. "Give me a bid, but be prepared for me to exceed it," Ségalot warns his clients. "I have created situations where I was anxious to speak to the collector after a sale because I had spent twice as much as agreed on *major* purchases."

I try to formulate a question about the correlation between making money as a consultant and overpaying for art. When consultants are on commission, they don't earn anything unless they buy. When they're on a retainer, no such conflict of interest gets in the way of the job. But as I struggle for the right words to broach this delicate subject, Ségalot looks at his watch. A flash of alarm crosses his face. He apologizes, stands up, pays the bill, and says, "It has been my pleasure."

I sit, finishing my water and collecting my thoughts. Ségalot is infectiously zealous. We had been sitting for almost an hour and he had spoken with absolute conviction the entire time. This is a talent essential to his job. On one level, the art market is understood as the supply and demand of art, but on another, it is an economy of belief. "Art is only worth what someone is willing to pay for it" is the operating cliché. Although this may suggest the relationship between a con artist and his mark, the people

who do well believe they say it. The confidence that the artist is and will continue to be culturally significant, confidence that the work is a good one, confidence that others will not withdraw their financial support.

6:35 P.M.

The lobby revolve around a central area where consultants are already here, as the evening sale is an opportunity to meet and greet "the money." In the queue for the coat check, and again in the line to pick up paddles for bidding, people speculate about which objects are going to do well and who is likely to buy what. Everybody knows something. People drop their voices when they utter a name or a lot number, so you tend to hear only the verdict: "That's going to fly" or "That estimate is way off." As people part ways to go to their seats, collectors say to each other "Good luck" and "See you in Miami." It's all gleaming smiles. Other

The crowd is international. You hear a lot of French in an array of Belgian, Swiss, and Parisian accents. Belgium and Switzerland probably have the highest per capita ratios of contemporary art collectors. Until World War II, France was the center for buying and selling art. From after the war to the early 1980s, London was the auction capital, but now the British city is a secondary site, where the buyers tend to bid over the phone. Looking at this busy scene, it is hard to believe that New York was a provincial outpost of the art business until the late 1970s. Christie's started holding auctions here only in 1977, but now, in the words of one Christie's expert, "The market is alive—all the major players are in the room."

I see David Teiger, a New York-based collector in his late seventies. He is talking to a well-preserved woman close to his own age.

"What period do you collect?" she asks.

"This morning," he responds.

"You like art by young artists?" she asks earnestly.

"I don't necessarily like it, but I buy it," he jokes.

"So . . . are you bidding tonight?"

"No. I don't come here to buy. I come to smell the perfume—the aroma of what is in the oven—to gauge where the public is going. That is nothing to do with where I might go. I'll go somewhere overlooked or undervalued."

Teiger prides himself on his independence; auctions have too much of a pack mentality for him. He bought Andy Warhol out of the Stable Gallery's show in 1963. "You know how much I paid for it?" he says. "Seven hundred and twenty dollars! Do you know when MoMA bought their first Warhol? 1982!" Having done that, why would he want to spend \$10 million on a lesser Warhol now? It wouldn't sit right with his adventurous self-image. He's not that kind of collector.

So who buys at auction? Many "serious" collectors of contemporary art buy from primary dealers. It's a lot cheaper, if a lot riskier, to be ahead of the curve. On the secondary or resale market, the risk is lower, because the work has been market-tested. All art is "priceless," but assurance is expensive. A small percentage of collectors buy only at auction. "They like the discipline of the deadline," explains a Sotheby's director. "They're very busy, so the sale makes them get their act together. They like the open nature of the auction, especially if there is a visible underbidder willing to pay a similar price. They also like the certainty that they've paid a market price on a given day in a given location."

who do well believe every word they say—at least at the moment they say it. The auction process is about managing confidence on all levels—confidence that the artist is and will continue to be culturally significant, confidence that the work is a good one, confidence that others will not withdraw their financial support.

**6:35 P.M.** The doors in the two-story glass wall of Christie's lobby revolve continuously with a steady flow of ticket holders. Many dealers and consultants are already here, as the evening sale is an opportunity to meet and greet "the money." In the queue for the coat check, and again in the line to pick up paddles for bidding, people speculate about which objects are going to do well and who is likely to buy what. Everybody knows something. People drop their voices when they utter a name or a lot number, so you tend to hear only the verdict: "That's going to fly" or "That estimate is way off." As people part ways to go to their seats, collectors say to each other "Good luck" and "See you in Miami." It's all gleaming smiles.

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"Distinctive," says the understated British correspondent. "Vulgar," says Baer. "A clown," says an emphatic voice from the back of the pack.

The salesroom seats a thousand people, but it looks more intimate. One's seat is a mark of status and a point of pride. Smack dab in the middle of the room sit Jack and Juliette Gold (not their real names), a pair of avid collectors, married with no kids, in their late forties. They fly into New York every May and November, stay in their favorite room at the Four Seasons, and arrange to have dinner with friends at Sette Mezzo and Balthazar. "The truth is," confides Juliette later, "you've got standing room, the terrible seats, the good seats, the very good seats, and the aisle seats—they are the best. You've got the big collectors who buy—they're at the front, slightly to the right. You have serious collectors who don't buy—they're toward the back. Then, of course, you have the vendors, who are hiding up in the private skyboxes. It's a whole ceremony. With few exceptions, everyone sits in exactly the same spot they did last season." Another collector told me that the evening sale was like "going to synagogue on the High Holidays. Everyone knows everybody else, but they only see each other three times a year, so they are chatting and catching up." Anecdotes abound about unnamed collectors who became so immersed in gossip that they forgot to bid.

Part of the pleasure of the auctions is the opportunity to be seen. Juliette is wearing a Missoni dress with no jewelry except for a whopping vintage Cartier diamond ring. ("It's dangerous to wear Prada," she warns. "You might get caught in the same outfit as three members of Christie's staff.") Jack sports a discreetly pinstriped Zegna suit with a cobalt-blue Hermès tie. Sometimes Jack and Juliette buy, sometimes they sell, but mostly they come because they love the sales. Juliette is a romantic whose Euro-

pean parents collected art, and Jack is a pragmatist whose stock and property business influences his perspective. Juliette told me that "an auction is like an opera with a language that you need to decipher." Jack seems to agree but ultimately describes a very different event: "Yes, even if you don't have a direct interest in the sale, you're emotionally involved because you'll own similar works by ten of the artists. An auction is an instant evaluation."

Tonight's auction is more than a series of sixty-four straightforward business deals; it is a kaleidoscope of conflicting interpretations and financial agendas. When I asked the couple why they thought collecting had become so popular in recent years, Juliette spoke about how so many more people were coming to understand that art could enrich their lives. Jack, by contrast, thinks it's because art has become an accepted way of "diversifying your investment portfolio." Although it offends the sensibilities of older "pure collectors," he says, the "new collectors, who have been making their money in hedge funds, are very aware of alternatives for their money. Cash pays so little return now that to invest in art doesn't seem like such a dumb idea. That's why the art market's been so strong—because there are few better options. If the stock market had two or three consecutive quarters of large growth, then, perversely, the art market might have a problem."

The art world is so small and resolutely insular that it is not much affected by political problems. "At the sales after September eleventh," explains Juliette, "you had absolutely no sense of the reality of the world outside. None whatsoever. I remember sitting in the sale that November and saying to Jack, 'We're going to come out of this room and the Twin Towers will be standing and everything will be good with the world.'"

Major disasters may not have an impact, but casual gossip has

that has a relationship to what is under discussion rather than what is hot for sale at the moment."

Back on campus, Hobbs and I walk over to the second-year grad studios—two rows of small industrial units facing a sidewalk that an undergrad (Peter Ortel) had transformed into a "Walk of Fame." Gold stars inscribed with the names of well-recognized CalArts alumni refer to the famous strip on Hollywood Boulevard and to the otherwise unmentionable problem: artists need to make a name for themselves. Hovering over the stars like halo afterthoughts are black spray-painted Mickey Mouse ears that deflate the self-aggrandizement and pay mock homage to CalArts' unlikely founder, Walt Disney.

Hollywood affects the horizons of the L.A. art world in subtle ways. After graduation, artists who don't support themselves through sales or teaching can work in the ancillary industries of costumes, set design, and animation. Sometimes the communities of artists and actors overlap. Ed Ruscha, who admits that "art is show business," used to date the model Lauren Hutton. Actors like Dennis Hopper, who is also a photographer and collector, or artists like CalArts graduate Jeremy Blake, who made abstract digital works for Paul Thomas Anderson's film *Punch-Drunk Love*, move between the worlds. Here on campus, however, one feels that most artists are openly hostile to commercial spectacles, as if CalArts were set up as the conscience or doppelgänger of the entertainment industry.

Hobbs unlocks her studio. All the doors have been customized with oversized names, cartoon numbers, collages, and even bas-relief sculptures. "Every grad has a space of their own that they are allowed to use twenty-four hours a day. I live in mine. You're not supposed to, but a lot of us do," she says as she points to a fridge, a hotplate, and a couch that turns into a bed. "There's

a shower down by the workshop," she adds. The cube is twelve by twelve feet, with dirty white walls and a cement floor, but it has twelve-foot-high ceilings and north-facing skylights, which give the workspace some dignity.

A few doors down and across the walk, the class is viewing the installation in Fiona's studio called *Painting Room II*, which will be the subject of this afternoon's discussion. Paint flies beyond the edges of four canvases onto the wall and floor. Pale scribbles evoke the work of Cy Twombly, while the paint on the floor recalls Jackson Pollock's drip method. The writing desk in the corner and the hard-to-pinpoint femininity of the space suggest Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Ironically, given the name of the crit class (Post-Studio Art), the installation is a forceful reassertion of the importance—even the romance—of the studio. It feels as if a restrained outburst or cool tantrum has taken place here. It's not grandiose or heroic but private and insistent. You can feel Fiona's diminutive height and the lonely hours. And on one of the canvases, you can almost make out the word *learning*.

Back in subterranean F200, the students sit in a different configuration from this morning. It's 3:15 P.M. and Fiona, with a hibiscus flower still tucked behind her ear, has chosen to sit behind a table. One of the knitters has abandoned her needles and lies on her stomach, chin in hands, looking at her intently, while a guy lies on his back with his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. Fiona is setting out the parameters of the discussion. "I have a schizophrenic practice. I do dry sociopolitical work, but I always have, and always will, paint. I like the process. All the decisions that I made while making the *Painting Room* were formal. I didn't want to work 'critically,'" she says, sweetly but defiantly, as she pulls in her chair and straightens her skirt. "There is a real masculine aggression to iconic 1950s abstract

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During installation, in front of an exquisitely crafted three-panel painting called 727-727, Blum was speaking quick-fire Japanese with their star artist, Takashi Murakami. The two men were laughing and arguing about the price of the work. English numbers erupted out of the Japanese flow—"eight hundred thousand," "one million," "one point five," "two million." The canvas depicts DOB, Murakami's cartoon alter ego, riding on a cloud-wave in a colorful world of virtuoso painting styles. The original painting with the 727 title is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The new 727 is more complicated, more accomplished; it's "a culmination and a departure." Several collectors are already vying to acquire it sight unseen, but what is it worth?

"Takashi worked so hard on this painting that several staff quit," said Poe, who grew up in West Los Angeles and was the lead singer in an art rock band called Blissed Out Fatalists before starting a gallery. I mentioned that I had heard that Murakami was going to show with the omnipotent Gagosian Gallery in New York. Poe sat down, gestured me to the empty chair beside him,

and asked, "Where did you hear that?" In the art world, gossip is never idle. It is a vital form of market intelligence.

After visiting Blum and Poe, I explored the stands with Samuel Keller, the director of Art Basel since 2000. Keller is a handsome forty-year-old whose smoothness is aptly signified by his close-shaven head and shiny shoes. As he did his rounds, he praised dealers in French, cracked jokes in gesticulating Italian, and maintained an even, warm tone in German with an irate dealer who didn't like the location of her stand. I believe I even heard him say "Shalom." Keller seems to possess all the best qualities of the multilingual Swiss—modesty, neutrality, internationalism, and an instinct for quality. The impresario also has a knack for appearing not to hold the reins of power. He recruits consultants to help choose which artists get the few coveted "Art Statements" spots (where young dealers put on solo shows of young artists) and enlists curators to help select and install "Art Unlimited" (a cavernous showroom of large-scale museum pieces). Keller even has twenty-two "ambassadors," who act as channels of communication for different territories. If you took all this at face value, he would seem to run the fair like an international summit or United Nations (to use his term) rather than a profit-making enterprise. It's a strategy that has no doubt contributed to Art Basel's ascendancy over older fairs like Art Cologne, the Chicago Art Fair, and New York's Armory Show, which have slipped into being local or regional events.

Art Basel takes place in a purpose-built exhibition hall that the Germans call a *Messe*, or mass, as in "the masses" or worshippers "going to mass." Since the Middle Ages the word has also referred to markets held on holy days, and today, by extension, to any trade fair. The main building is a black glass box on the outside, with a clear-glass circular courtyard on the inside.

Three hundred gallery stands are split between two floors, each arranged in two easy-to-navigate concentric squares. The art is so demanding that the architecture needs to be nearly invisible. The ceilings are high enough to go unnoticed, and dealers praise the quality of the walls, which support even the heaviest works. Most importantly, the expensive, artificial lighting is clean and white. It blends with the natural midsummer sun filtered through the windows of the atrium.

When Art Basel first opened, in 1970, it looked like a flea market, with pictures stacked up against walls and dealers coming in with canvases rolled up under their arms. Nowadays the fair provides a respectable environment. In his light Swiss German accent, Keller explains this approach: "If you go after art and quality, the money will come later . . . We have to make the same decisions as the artists. Do they create great art or art that sells well? With the galleries, it's the same. Are they commercial or do they believe in something? We're in a similar situation."

**10:55 A.M.** Five minutes until the fair opens to the VIPs. Don and Mera Rubell, a zealous pair of Miami-based collectors, stroll into the expensive mob with their adult son, Jason. They're wearing running shoes and baggy trousers with pockets and toggles in unlikely places, like funky grandparents setting out on a long hike. They are so unostentatious, so inconspicuously wealthy, that I've heard them referred to as "the Rubbels." The three look amused by the spectacle of anxious shoppers. Having collected art since the 1960s but with particular vigor since 1989, when they inherited money from Don's brother, Studio 54 co-creator and hotel owner Steve Rubell, they are familiar with the prefair jitters. "When you first start collecting, you're intensely competi-

tive, but eventually you learn two things," explains Don. "First, if an artist is only going to make one good work, then there is no sense in fighting over it. Second, a collection is a personal vision. No one can steal your vision."

Art world insiders take a hard line on collecting for the "right" reasons. Acceptable motives include a love of art and a philanthropic desire to support artists. While it seems that everyone, including dealers, hates speculators, established collectors most loathe conspicuous social climbers. "Sometimes I'm embarrassed to identify myself as a collector. It's about being rich, privileged, and powerful," says Mera. Don listens to his wife with affection, then adds, "There is an implied incompetence. Out of everyone in the art world, collectors are the least professional. All they have to do is write a check." Both Don and Mera have down-to-earth Brooklyn accents. Their heights differ by a full foot. Married since 1964, they rally the conversation between them. "Collector' should be an earned category," says Mera. "An artist doesn't become an artist in a day, so a collector shouldn't become a collector in a day. It's a lifetime process."

The Rubells have a twenty-seven-room museum where they rotate displays of their family collection. They also have a research library containing over 30,000 volumes. "We read, we look, we hear, we travel, we commit, we talk, we sleep art. At the end of the day, we commit virtually every penny we make—all our resources—to it," Mera declares with a half-raised fist. "But it's *not* a sacrifice. It's a real privilege."

Although their collection includes work from the 1960s, the family is particularly passionate about "emergent" art, a term that is indicative of changing times. In the 1980s, when people started to feel uncomfortable with the word *avant-garde*, they adopted the euphemism *cutting-edge*. Now, with *emergent art*, anticipation

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 whir 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

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-

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—

Greek supercollector, who was evidently trying to acquire the work.\* I looped back, to recapture the experience of being *in* something rather than looking *at* something, taking refuge in a mirrored closet with ledges upon which sat taxidermied birds and phallic fungi.

On the way out I met Iwona Blazwick, director of London's Whitechapel Gallery, who was ticking the Canadian pavilion off her map of the Giardini. With long blond hair and a bright smile, Blazwick challenges the easy assumption that curators are the dowdiest players in the art world. What did you think? I asked her. "Extraordinary!" she said intensely. "Altmejd transformed the pavilion into a *wunderkammer*, a cabinet of curiosities." Blazwick tucked her map in her bag and continued: "I love stepping out of the everyday into the space of art. I love to be immersed in an idea or an aesthetic or something phenomenological. Frankly, I get enough of everyday life."

Many see the pavilions as anachronistic; they posit quaint ideas of nationhood that are collapsing under the weight of globalization. While Blazwick admits that the notion of national schools or styles is meaningless, she adores the pavilions because they have the potential to be "utopian propositions." The pavilions stand alone. "They have no function," she explained, "which means artists are free to create something that has autonomy." Blazwick nodded at acquaintances as they traipsed into the pavilion. "Shows that should be called 'Here's my latest year of work' are often disappointing," she continued. "But when artists take on the pavilion and make a propositional statement, when

\*The pavilion contained two works. George Hartman bought one as a gift for the Art Gallery of Ontario, while Jouannou purchased the other.

they use its dynamics, architecture, and history, then you can get something really interesting."

Blazwick tendered a list of legendary pavilions. In 1993, Hans Haacke chopped up the floor of the German pavilion. "It was the first time an artist took on the whole pavilion as an ideological, symbolic structure," she explained. In 2001 in the Belgian pavilion, Luc Tuymans premiered a series of acclaimed paintings about the Congo to make a statement about colonial history. In 2003, Chris Ofili transformed his U.K. pavilion into "an oasis of Africanness, a lost paradise of his imagination." In 2005, Annette Messager covered up *FRANCIA*, the Italian word for France that is inscribed on the front of the French pavilion, with a sign saying *CASINO*, recasting the nation as a lawless territory of risk and pleasure. "These pavilions were unforgettable because they were immersive," concluded Blazwick. "They weren't windows on the world. They were worlds in their own right."

Seduced by Blazwick's enthusiasm, I wondered how, as a professional, she managed to give the art her full attention. "Venice is a big party, and the preview is a networking experience," she confessed. "You skim across the art and you really run, but you prepare. You get a lot of prenotice in the form of press releases. I take notes about things I want to follow up on later." Still, the volume of art means that one will probably fail to pay attention to something that could have changed one's life. "I walked into the Hungarian pavilion and walked straight out again," admitted Blazwick. "I thought, 'Six black boxes. I can't be bothered. I haven't got the time.'" Thankfully, she returned to the pavilion, by thirty-year-old Andreas Fogarasi, and discovered that each black box contained a video that was "a very quiet, complex, poetic, and funny meditation on the failure of utopia."

The new Italian pavilion (the *Padiglione italiano*, showcasing Italian art) is located ten minutes' walk away from the Giardini, in the Arsenale. These old naval yards are given over to what feels like a kilometer of exhibition space during the Biennale. Booths staffed by Biennale workers who give out free cups of cold water and the availability of a handful of chauffeur-driven golf carts tacitly acknowledge its marathon quality. Although the Arsenale is mostly filled with art of Rob Storr's choosing (an extension of his international exhibition), this year it also hosts one regional (Africa) and three national (China, Turkey, and Italy) pavilions. The *Padiglione italiano* features two artists: Giuseppe Penone, an older artist associated with the Arte Povera movement, and a young star named Francesco Vezzoli. When I arrived at the far end of the Arsenale, where the Italian pavilion is situated, the handsome Vezzoli, sweaty and bedraggled, was in the midst of an interview with Charlotte Higgins from the *Guardian*. The international press loved Vezzoli's *Democracy*; reports were appearing not just in the arts sections of national newspapers but in their political pages.

Certainly *Democracy* made a good story. The artist had enlisted the collaboration of two of Washington, D.C.'s most important political spin doctors, Mark McKinnon and Bill Knapp, to write hypothetical scripts for the advertising campaigns of two U.S. presidential candidates. Vezzoli then recruited the Hollywood actress Sharon Stone to "run" for one party and the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy to represent the other. Once the videos were complete, Vezzoli installed them in a circular room with red carpet and navy walls in such a way that the candidates seemed to shout at each other. Vezzoli had opted for what Blazwick might have called a "dystopian proposition." In his words, "The notion of choosing somebody to represent your country for

art is not so dissimilar from choosing someone who represents your country for politics." Moreover, he saturated the "Italian" pavilion with overtly American content. "We've been governed for years by Silvio Berlusconi—a man who grew his business selling American soap operas to the Italian audience," Vezzoli told me. "In this way, my installation is actually more Italian than what is stereotypically Italian. It's 'glocal.'"

Italian *Vanity Fair* (the nation's best-selling weekly) ran a ten-page cover story. "To have the message 'Sharon for President' on all the newsstands in Italy—not only was it hilarious, for me it was the complete short-circuit," said Vezzoli. "It was an aggressive advertising campaign that I almost consider to be part of the work." Vezzoli's art often addresses the dynamics of celebrity and manipulation. "If I had had the funds," he added, "I would have covered the whole of Italy with posters and bought ads on television saying 'Sharon for President.'" The attention was fantastic, but the highlight for Vezzoli came from elsewhere. "The most surreal, sublime moment came when Italy's vice president and minister of culture, Francesco Rutelli, came to visit the pavilion," said Vezzoli. "He is known as *er piacione*, 'the hunk' of Italian politics. He's incredibly handsome, and he is married to a famous Italian journalist. He is the real living instance of what I had just created as a fiction."

Vezzoli thinks that the Venice Biennale is like the Cannes Film Festival. "The thin boundary between art and entertainment is slowly vanishing," he explained. "The two fields are probably proceeding more and more with the same strategies. Maybe artists are greedy for more attention or more funding for our projects. Perhaps if I fail as an artist I'll end up as a second-rate media mogul." While many artists are most comfortable making work for the initiated, Vezzoli admits, "I have one weakness. I am

We no longer hear of so many "hard buys" and there are fewer meltdowns in the VIP room.

While the market has shrunk, the structures and dynamics of the larger art world are relatively stable. Artists continue to make their work, dealers and curators show it, critics comment. Although the advertising pages in *Artforum* have declined dramatically, the mindset of the magazine's editors evolves at its own rate. Similarly, the curricula of art schools such as CalArts are like supertankers; they are not blown about in the wind. So, with regard to the chapter "The Crit," the most significant change is that graduating artists will find it more difficult not only to acquire representation from a gallery, but even to obtain jobs as installers or assistants.

The art market is a complex beast that is mutating all the time. It is murky and inefficient, social and global. My latest thoughts are always available on the Articles page of [www.sarah-thornton.com](http://www.sarah-thornton.com).

2. *Should student-artists think about the art world or ignore it?*

The art world and market are practically taboo subjects in some art schools, which is a shame because thinking about an issue is not the same as pandering to it or being driven by it. We all have our own creative strategies, but, personally, I don't think that willful ignorance or self-delusion is ever a good thing. Most artists who have gained recognition of some kind have a pretty clear picture of the world that first receives their art. They have tactics of engagement or avoidance that suit their temperament and their work.

3. *What is the real status of the artist in the art world?*

Ideologically, the artist is supposed to be at the top, but practically, this is not always the case. In chapter 6, on the flight

with Murakami, his assistants, his dealers, and various museum people, I observe an instance when the strata are made unusually explicit. At that moment, the artist was in the power seat, literally 1A. Usually it is much more ambiguous than that. The hierarchies of the art world are complicated and volatile and dependent on the perspective of the beholder. Any individual artist can have many nebulous places within them.

Hierarchies among artists are often disavowed but they can be brutal. Perhaps many artists love to loathe the art world because they hate dealing with their position in it. Every gallerist with a large roster of artists is acutely aware of the sensitivities of status. They have the artists who pay the bills, the ones who bring credibility, the sleepers who they hope will gain some recognition. And they have to handle them all without inciting sibling rivalry.

In the Introduction, I quote John Baldessari's joke that artists could wear stripes like generals, so everyone would know their rank. This is funny, in part, because artist hierarchies are nothing like military ones; they are much more complex. They rely on diverse forms of validation, legitimation, and endorsement, which all basically come down to a belief in value.

4. *Did your "subjects" perform for you?*

When I started researching the book, I was a nobody sociologist for whom most art-world insiders couldn't be bothered to perform. As my writing gained momentum and my profile rose (particularly after *The New Yorker* published an abridged version of chapter 4), I may have encountered more masks and more spin. But the people who became characters in the book (rather than simply remaining interviewees) did so, in part, because of their comfort with being honest, revealing, even raw. Of course,