

MECHADEMIA

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VOLUME

5



Fanthropologies

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MECHADEMIA 5

*Fanthropologies*



# Mechademia

An Annual Forum for Anime, Manga, and Fan Arts

FRENCHY LUNNING, EDITOR

*Mechademia* is a series of books published by the University of Minnesota Press devoted to creative and critical work on anime, manga, and the fan arts. Linked through their specific but complex aesthetic, anime, manga, and the fan arts have influenced a wide array of contemporary and historical cultures through design, art, film, and gaming. This series seeks to examine, discuss, theorize, and reveal this unique style through its historic Japanese origins and its ubiquitous global presence manifested in popular and gallery culture. Each book is organized around a particular narrative aspect of anime and manga; these themes are sufficiently provocative and broad in interpretation to allow for creative and insightful investigations of this global artistic phenomenon.

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MECHADEMIA **5**

*Fanthropologies*

*Frenchy Lunning, Editor*

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS • URBAN, MINN. 55455



<http://www.mechademia.org>

Spot illustrations by Barbara Guttman

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press

111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290  
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520  
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

ISSN: 1934-2489  
ISBN: 978-0-8166-7387-2

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10      10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Introduction

FRENCHY LUNNING

Recently nothing has inspired more interest and attention in studies of Japanese and global popular culture than fans and fan activities, and the word *otaku* has entered both the popular and scholarly lexicons. But like other commonly used terms, we tend to naturalize words like 'fan' and 'otaku' to assume we know all that they denote, connote, include, and exclude. In our need to identify and to find community, we lump common (mis)conceptions into a subject we call *otaku*. But in truth, we *otaku* are a vast multiplicity of subjects, practices, and texts that have gathered speed and are now fanning out in massive waves of morphing production and exchange. Constantly innovating, creating, performing, and consuming new iterations of this "style," this family of forms, narratives, and characters is sutured together by the conceptual threads of *Art Mesho*, the term we use to describe the visual and narrative forms that extend from Japanese anime and manga and that have now vaulted onto the global stage to be transformed over and over again in local sites and citations.

As Thomas LaVare wrote in this volume's call for papers: "Terms like 'fan' and 'otaku' have been mobilized for a wide range of reasons in a wide variety of discourses, from gender studies to inquiries about technology and sociality. We think that the exploration of fan activities and *otaku* phenomena is crucial to understanding the contemporary world of transnational image and information flows, as well as the transnational formation of concepts and discourses. In keeping with our mission to forge links between different communities of knowledge and to challenge the conventional channels for the flow of information, in *Médiocrité 4* we propose a challenge to the

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received understandings of fans. We would like to challenge quasi-anthropological and pseudo-sociological readings in which the identity of ‘fan’ or ‘otaku’ is presumed in advance as a fixed object of knowledge.” We have all seen these unproductive readings in condescending journalistic works where the identity of “fan” or “otaku” is assumed: the geeky but newsworthy Other. In contrast, the present volume conceives “fanthropologies” not as a pat anthropology of fans but as an exploration of landscapes and subjects that challenge received frameworks and ideas.

The call asked authors to consider the “social and historical construction of fans or otaku as an object of knowledge” from which new insights have emerged. From the many fine essays submitted, we chose several that rise to that challenge. The zones of activity treated in these essays range from manga and anime fansubs and copyright issues to dolls and Rococo style. They include a remarkable photo essay on the emerging art of cosplay photography, a biographical manga of a doll-fan, and an insightful discussion of Akihabara by a scholar disguised as a tour guide disguised in a cosplay costume. The response to our call for papers was so strong that the editors decided to continue the discussion in a follow-up volume, *Mechademia 6: User Enhanced*, to be published in 2011. *Mechademia 6* will present essays focused on alterations fans bring about through the reception of these performances and processes—the sometimes startling changes in landscapes, bodies, and subjectivities that become part of their fan identities.

*Mechademia 5: Fanthropologies* is divided into four sections. The first, “Sites of Transposition,” focuses on transformative processes applied to texts, textual subjects, fans, and ideas about fans. The essays in the second section, “Patterns of Consumption,” range from Ōtsuka Eiji’s influential theory of narrative consumption to Kon Satoshi’s narratives about consumption. The third section, “Modes of Circulation,” discusses fansubs, scanlations, 2channel, and Akihabara’s otaku tours. Finally, “Styles of Intervention,” the fourth part, examines forms of militance and resistance (aligned variously along political, economic, national, and gender lines) possible in and through fan studies.

An exciting review section in this volume sparkles with cogent and critical discussions of emerging works, complementing these with a reflexive glance back in a special multipart review of *Evangelion 1.01*. *Mechademia 5* concludes with a fascinating dialogue between associate editor Thomas Lamarre and Patrick W. Galbraith in the トレンド or “Trends” section, a wide-ranging discussion that wraps up the volume by reviewing some of the dominant approaches to fan studies up to now and pointing to its possible and provocative futures.

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*Mechademia* is proud to offer this volume, and we dedicate it to the vast, global, and radically diverse community of otaku who are breaking the rules and setting new standards through their innovations in fanfiction, illustration, animation, circulation, and distribution. With the two books of *Mechademia 5* and *Mechademia 6*, we hope to illuminate the discourses and discursive practices that spiral out from anime and manga and proliferate in increasingly dynamic and compelling forms.

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## **Sites of Transposition**

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## The Art of Cute Little Things: Nara Yoshitomo's Parapolitics

In the beginning was, is, the word: *fan*. What is a fan? I refer to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which I often do in such moments: it tells us that *fan* comes from *fanatic* (it is surprising how many people don't realize this origin). Whereas the *OED* does list a 1682 precursor ("The Loyal Phans to abuse"), not until the turn of the twentieth century does *fan* emerge as an American transformation of *fanatic*, referring to "a keen and regular supporter of a (professional) sports team" (originally, the *OED* states, baseball). From there it was not a big transformation for *fan* to morph into a "keen follower of a specified hobby or amusement" and thence to indicate "an enthusiast for a particular person or thing."<sup>1</sup>

Then, we might ask, what is a fanatic? The *OED* tells us that as an adjective, *fanatic* meant that which "might result from possession by a deity or demon; frantic, furious"; "Frenzied; mad." Furthermore, the fanatic is "characterized, influenced, or prompted by excessive and mistaken enthusiasm"; she is an "unreasoning enthusiast."<sup>2</sup>

The excessive, the unreasoning, the enthusiastic, and the mistaken: these, then, are some of the semantic dimensions of the fan that haunt its history. In the fan's singular obsession with a mistaken object—one that



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somehow inappropriately, and excessively, stands in for healthier, normal object choices—we hear more than a suggestion of the notion of the fetish.<sup>3</sup> The *affect* of the fan—devoted enthusiasm—is here combined with a question mark appended to the *object* of that (inappropriate) enthusiasm. In its indication of the phenomenon of possession, the *OED* reveals how affect and object exchange substance; the body of the fanatic is caught up in a frenzy of identification with the object of his devotion, such that the deity takes over the fanatic’s very being. The excessiveness of the fan’s enthusiasm is bound to result in a mistaken object of affection; conversely, the very mistakenness of the object is tied to the mistaken enthusiasm of the fan. In either or both cases, the social abnormality of the fan-object relation is staged.

Perhaps nowhere more so than in Japan has the fan figure, with its incarnation in the *otaku*, been pushed to the extremes of mass cultural fascination. The stereotypical otaku figure displays an intense intimacy with mass-mediated fan objects; a highly developed connoisseurship of animated minutiae; a solitary mode of being, yet accompanied by absorptions into virtual sociality (with forms of convening and movement that bespeak new modes of communication); and something akin to fetishism, in which small objects of desire come to stand in for the larger, more totalized sexual relationships that are designated as normal and good.<sup>4</sup> We might think of the otaku figure as embodying the core contradiction of the fan figure in general: big passion, little object (often literalized in the otaku’s attraction to and passion for minutely specified elements of aesthetic form—the color of an animated figure’s hair, for example, or the cat’s ears a character displays: elemental provocations of desire, elements of *moe*, to use the Japanese word).<sup>5</sup>

The otaku-child figure, lost to normal sociality, sexuality, and national-cultural identification, has thus been refunctioned in academic and aesthetic discourses as the most appropriate sign for the strange fate of the Japanese nation-state and its peculiar history: defeated in World War II, bombed atomically (the bomb dropped on Hiroshima was called “Little Boy”), and dominated by the looming, fraternally sinister, yet comforting presence of the United States. To many, the otaku figure has seemed to encapsulate all-too-perfectly the infantilization and impotence of the Japanese nation-state and its mass culture in the wake of Japan’s defeat in 1945.<sup>6</sup> But the otaku figure is merely the most publicly available and capitalized-on object of national-cultural anxieties about youth and national futurity. Primarily gendered male, otaku find their mass-cultural counterparts in the objectified persona of *shōjo* (young girl), a word indicating a subject position that is primarily female but can be affectively shared by either gender (*shōjo*

indicates a psychically open space epitomized by the “adolescent girl” not yet fully appropriated by the socio-sexual order).<sup>7</sup> With their everyday commodity desires for the *kawaii* (cute) and for the tender, whimsical, and romantic affective worlds that embody cuteness, *shōjo* have become the theoretical counterparts of otaku.

How do the large obsessions of fans and the smallness of ludic objects, cuteness and weirdness, the child and the adult work together in contemporary Japanese art? That is a question I want to explore by looking at the works of Nara Yoshitomo. Nara—acclaimed for his paintings of small, solitary, strange children in various states of anger, abnegation, and abjectness—has become the center of a large international community of fans, many of them young women, who have found in his art and his aesthetic practices expressive means to identify their experiences of advanced capitalist everydayness and the mysteries of psychic maturation. Nara’s work explicitly and repetitively thematizes the “child” as an internal formation and as an external object in mass culture

THE EXCESSIVENESS OF THE FAN’S ENTHUSIASM IS BOUND TO RESULT IN A MISTAKEN OBJECT OF AFFECTION; CONVERSELY, THE VERY MISTAKENNESS OF THE OBJECT IS TIED TO THE MISTAKEN ENTHUSIASM OF THE FAN. IN EITHER OR BOTH CASES, THE SOCIAL ABNORMALITY OF THE FAN-OBJECT RELATION IS STAGED.

and commodity life; his works incorporate a thoroughly disciplined syntax of dreamlike associations, fairytale motifs from European sources, American and Japanese comic-book styles, and naive figurations of young girls and animals (mostly puppies) to create an art that has produced startling effects of identification among many viewers. The resolutely nondigital and hand-crafted visual styles of Nara are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the high-gloss digital artworks of Murakami Takashi, Japan’s most famous contemporary artist (Nara would be a close second). Yet, as we know, the two artists have collaborated on many works, have had joint exhibitions, shared interviews, and have a long-term working friendship (although it is said that the friendship is no longer viable). There is even a Web site called “Narakami” that sells their products (it assures its readers that Murakami and Nara are “good friends”).<sup>8</sup> Murakami has worked to theorize his art and has incorporated Nara’s works in his larger theory of Japanese art, which he has termed “Superflat.” In engaging “Superflat” visuality and its relationship to the gaze and the figure of the child, we can begin to grasp the fan appeal of Nara’s works and their powers of attraction.

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So first, Murakami: he came to international attention with his exhibition entitled “Superflat,” held in Japan in 2000 and subsequently staged in the United States in 2001. Murakami’s essay “Superflat Manifesto,” which opened the catalogue for the exhibitions, presented a distinctive theory of Japanese art. Saturated by the techno-aesthetics of Japanese anime in particular and mass-cultural energies in general, Superflat art is premised on a digitally constituted world, one in which a multiplicity of perspectives and planar surfaces coexist without the privileging of any one perspective or plane.<sup>9</sup>

Superflat connotes much more than the visual, however. For Murakami, it also connotes the resolute flattening of distinctions between popular culture and any form of high culture. And even though Superflat is most closely associated with contemporary postdigital aesthetics, Murakami is invested in theorizing a lineage of Japanese aesthetics, a particular stream of artistic production that has emphasized the movement of the eye across decorative, metamorphosing, playful surfaces. It is an aesthetic that fundamentally overflows and displaces canonical distinctions between high and low art and much else in the name of a singularly imagined Japanese visual and cultural regime. Among those hierarchies that Superflat art displaces—or claims to displace—is the familiar one that includes the adult and the child. It is this Superflat placement of the child that I want to take up here, starting with the very notion of the subject itself and its relationship to vision.

In his important essay entitled “Super Flat Speculation,” which functions as a companion essay to Murakami’s “Super Flat Manifesto,” the philosopher Azuma Hiroki uses the work of Jacques Lacan to theorize the work of the gaze, or the play of gazes, in Superflat aesthetics. As Azuma explains: “I look at you. You look at me. And it is the interaction of our gazes . . . that provides us with the sense that we share the same space, that we occupy a common ‘there.’”<sup>10</sup> The creation of this effect is produced through the “use of linear perspective and the interaction of gaze.”<sup>11</sup> Azuma then argues that linear perspective—which conjures a sense of reality by having lines of sight converge on a central vanishing point, thus producing a unified sense of space—is a socially constructed perspective that “requires the suppression of the childish sensibility that would see instead an accumulation of independent objects . . . each an image with which to be empathized individually.”<sup>12</sup> Again, Azuma: “A child sees something, and in so doing feels desire. But the child has no conception of ‘the self looking at something.’ Simply put, the child is unaware of the relativity of its own perspective. Lacan understood this state as lacking an *awareness of gaze*.” This suppression of the child’s unself-conscious, visually polymorphous sensibility, this abandonment of the omnipotent realm of

images, is virtually synonymous with Lacan's notion of castration: "to be castrated is to abandon a direct tie to the image (the direct gratification of desire) and come to recognize one's own gaze. . . . The child may be charmed by images, but the adult is conscious of

the gaze."<sup>13</sup> The child must abandon the realm of images, of the omnipotence of its desire, to enter into the (adult) realm of the social. Murakami's work embodies this relationship between the child and vision by his incessant motifs of anime-like eyes throughout his art, eyes that are "signs of eyes," in Azuma's formulation.

Nara Yoshitomo's work embodies a different relationship to the child and to the gaze. A solitary child is suspended within an indeterminate, muted background; the child is alone and lonely, concurrently tender and violent, adorable and perverse: this is the archetypical scene in a Nara painting. Nara's work has been compared to that of Balthus; others see it as evoking outsider art, or children's art itself, in its use of simple lines and deformations.<sup>14</sup> Sketches and drawings, the forms that Nara has consistently valorized (even in his highly finished paintings, the emphasis on drawing remains), have commonly been regarded as preparatory to painting as the *summa* of the artistic process; thus, drawings are canonically considered incomplete, in process, developmental, characteristics that are easily mapped onto the figure of the child in process, an entity ever metamorphosing.<sup>15</sup> Texts and pictures sometimes overlap, with a proliferation of works made up of scrawls on envelopes, scribbles on brown paper, and pages torn from notebooks. These remind one of the illicit drawings of a child at school, transgressive and furtive. They are all resolutely undigital. They all evoke an aesthetics of the fragment. In their fragmentation and in their elevation of drawing, again, they evoke the minor, the occasional, the spontaneous, the misfit (thus Nara's many references, implicit and explicit, to punk rock), and the child: theme, style, and medium recapitulate one another (Figure 1).<sup>16</sup> And with exceptions and elaborations—Nara's work is more diverse than is sometimes acknowledged—his signature characters, the ones that seem to exemplify this aesthetic more than others, are the glaring, large-eyed girl children of his iconic portraits, strange permutations of the round-eyed *über*-cute girls of manga and anime renown.

Do Nara's children lack the gaze of Murakami's anime characters? These children do not have the anime eyes that Murakami produces, the signs of

A SOLITARY CHILD IS SUSPENDED  
WITHIN AN INDETERMINATE, MUTED  
BACKGROUND; THE CHILD IS ALONE  
AND LONELY, CONCURRENTLY TENDER  
AND VIOLENT, ADORABLE AND  
PERVERSE: THIS IS THE ARCHETYPICAL  
SCENE IN A NARA PAINTING.



FIGURE 1. Nara Yoshitomo, *Fight It Out*, 2002. Courtesy of Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York.

eyes, as Azuma describes them, within fields of superflattened digital repetition. Yet, the eyes have it in Nara's work. They are a recurrent motif, with a recurrent signature shape: elongated, narrowed, a flattened ellipse (a black half-circle works as an analog of the iris; a smaller olive-colored half-circle operates as the pupil). Here we don't feel so much the pulling of the gaze over

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the plane of the work, of the morphing of forms into one another, as the pulling of our gaze toward the eyes of Nara's children. The eyes of these child figures function as repositories of smoldering affect. Most famously, they glare. Sometimes they look sad, other times frustrated. Rarely do they present an unmediated happy face. It is as if Nara reinstates the gaze presumed to be missing in the promiscuous vision of Superflat art, thus providing an uneasy supplement to Murakami's anime-inspired "signs of eyes" (Figure 2).

Following Lacan via Azuma, we might say that Murakami's signature work is in the domain of the imaginary, of a pre-oedipal, unfettered promiscuity of infant vision, while Nara's reinstates the post-oedipal child, the child who has already found itself abandoned within the symbolic order. Nara gives back something that Murakami forecloses. He gives back the lack that lacks in Murakami—and that might signal the ultimately horrific dimension of Murakami's serially repetitive eyes—in the register of loss, figured by the vulnerable yet aggressive children in his work. He locates a range of affects that Murakami does not provide. His characters are epitomes of perverse children, sometimes clutching knives or smoking cigarettes, with oversized heads and narrowed, elongated eyes. Nara's solitary children are somehow outside the social at the same time that they seem to have borne prematurely the burdens of the socio-symbolic order. They upset the developmental temporality that the child must traverse on its road to normalcy (Figure 3).<sup>17</sup>

Their eyes, if not precisely anime-like, do not provide the realist instantiation of the gaze that classic Western portraiture would provide, either (and here the famous example of Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, which Lacan discusses—and Azuma takes up—as exemplifying the intersection of gazes constitutive of one-point perspective and the form of subjectivity the results from this perspective). Typically, these child figures don't look directly at the viewer, and when they do look frontally, their eyes don't leave the impression of a reciprocal gaze. Their vision is oblique, fixed on the middle distance; even the objects they often hold fail to fix their gazes. Nara's affective visions course through the figure of the traumatized child (we could say "the castrated subject"), yet the "castrated" space of vision here does not constitute one of perspectively reciprocal, intersubjective space. Instead, in the obliquity of their regard, the little child figures—glaring out into the distance but not composed to intersect with the gaze of the viewer—seem to reveal a traumatic encounter with the Real; at the same time, their aggression is not directed to any one point of blame or appeal. Their eyes, "looking awry," seem to be fixed on some anamorphic spot, some blot that has caused them to become preternaturally worldly: traumatized children, yet children



**FIGURE 2.** Nara Yoshitomo, *In the Deepest Puddle*, 1995. Courtesy of Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo.

nevertheless.<sup>18</sup> Their regard—or lack of it—is directed toward the immensity of the socio-symbolic order itself.

Thus, they often float out of or stand in indeterminate space, a kind of creepy (some would say dreamy) pastel background, featureless and encroaching (in person, one can see the impeccably polished finish of the backgrounds of these often enormous paintings). Sometimes the child stands waist deep in a dark puddle of nothingness that extends in every direction to the edges of the painting. This formless surround of the indeterminate becomes the condition for their semi-emergence as subjects, at the same time that it threatens to engulf them. They smoke cigarettes, hold knives (and paintbrushes), and clearly can wound (and are wounded, repeatedly), yet their tough stances



FIGURE 3. Nara Yoshitomo, *Too Young to Die*, 2001. Courtesy of Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo.

and glares rarely attain the status of unalloyed malevolence (although the child in Nara's painting *The Little Judge* comes close) (Figure 4).

We might regard these children as suspended subjects, subjects in formation. To paint a child as a subject is to suspend or stop time at a moment when the body-being is at its most transformative; the child virtually embodies the principle of change and metamorphosis. If paintings of children tend to focus on their innocence and purity, it is precisely to foreground a much-desired transitory perfection and their aesthetic protection from the forces of inevitable growth, and thus the loss of childhood itself. Nara's children are not playing; they are not set within worlds of growth and movement. They are not located within family (certainly not), with friends, with any Other at



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