pingmag

Shinji Murakami: A video game generation artist transforming ordinary life into 8-bit

SHARE **f** Like 60 ✦

WRITTEN BY **YUKO MATONO**

SEPTEMBER 23, 2013 **ART**

Anyone who grew up with Nintendo video games can't help but get nostalgic when they look at the work of New York-based Shinji Murakami. In our all-digital age today this sense of the low-fi actually feels fresh. On the surface his art is pop and cute, but look further and you're find hidden concepts behind them that are almost like **strategy guides** for enjoying the art more.

🍁 What made you think you wanted to be an artist?

💬 When I was 20 I wanted to be a graphic designer and went to Tokyo. Having no experience I couldn't get any interviews and then I met KAMI, a street artist I really admired. From around this time I was drawing pictures with a computer but KAMI told me to try doing it by hand, and that's how I started.

I didn't go to graphic design school but rather a school where I learnt how to use software like Photoshop and Illustrator. I just really loved using the software. My artworks are the lowest level of bitmap composition, like can be made with Photoshop 1.0, with lines so simple you can draw them with Illustrator 1.0, and hand-drawn characters that even a child could draw. When I make an image digitally I tend to use Photoshop and Illustrator, but I'm mixing this with primitive things.
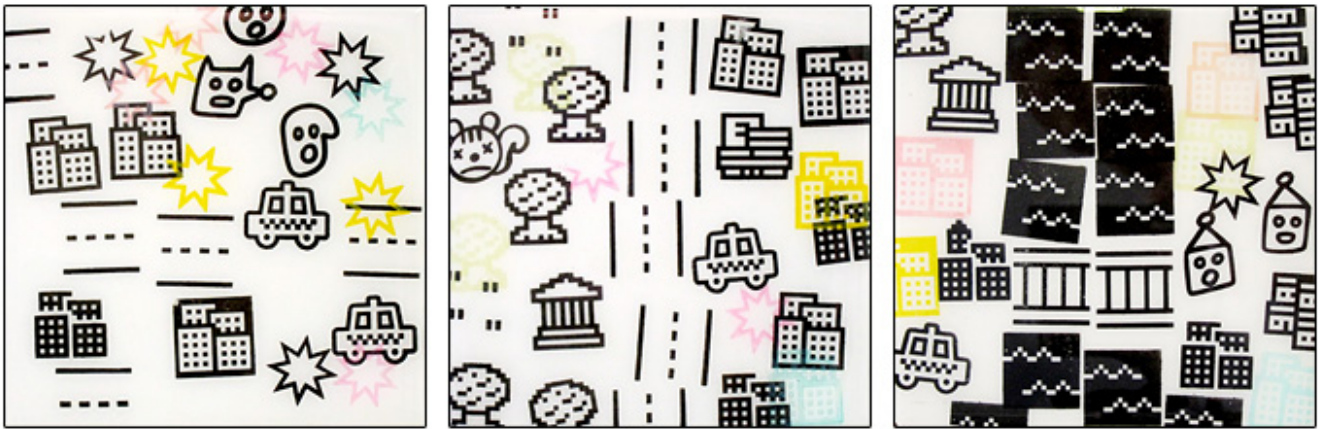
'Random NYC (Rush Hour, Guggenheim & Metropolitan Museums, Williamsburg Bridge)' (2012)

❋ You've taken this digitally primitive 8-bit technique and introduced the world of video games into art. It feels very much like what Japanese art is doing today.

💬 When people look at old Nintendo video games like Dragon Quest there are many icons that they don't understand. There are lots of parts where there isn't enough information and players have to catch up. Back then we were really using our heads and imaginations when we played. More recent games are too realistic, it's like you're in a movie – and there's no need to use your imagination.

I find the sensation from playing those old video games and the process of making contemporary art to be pretty similar. You can just enjoy it with your eyes and you can also get more out of it when you know the ideas and rules. For example, with Damien Hirst's spot paintings, I didn't understand what was so good about them at first. But then I read about the idea behind the series – the same color never appears twice. What I read said that Hirst had a "phenomenal love of color" and knowing this made me think that contemporary art is really fun.
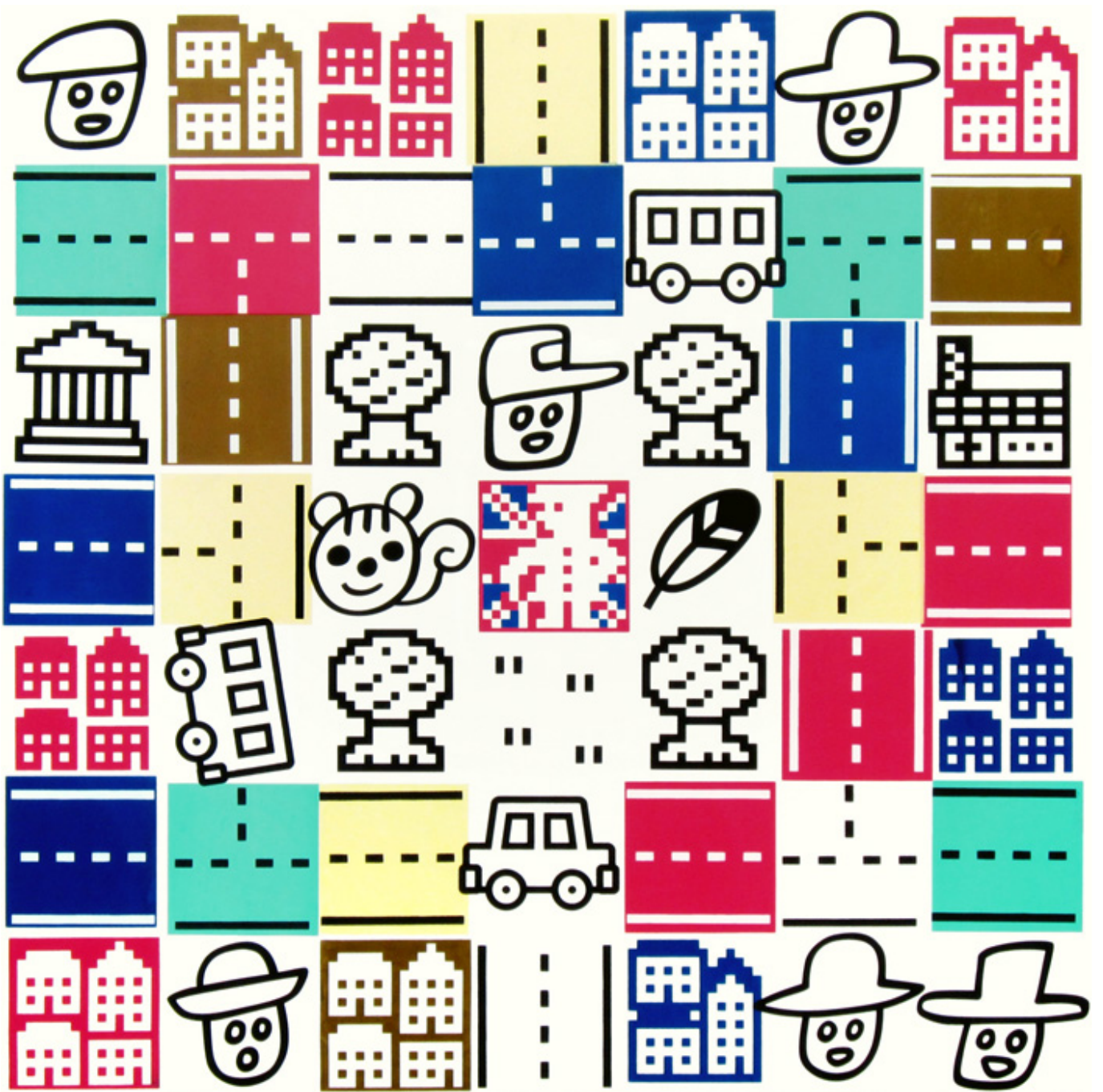
'Chippewa Square' (2012)

### ❧ What was it that made you think you would make an artwork using 8-bit video games?

💬 When I was doing street art long ago I thought that I should just do what I liked the most. Well, I used to love video games, so I painted game items like swords. I made some tree icons and put them in a row, and that led me to think that I could make a map looks like from first Zelda.

In the beginning I was just painting icons for people in the know – Dragon Quest trees, mountains, rivers, villages and so on. Then I ran out of ideas and painted something totally different, something like a real "painting". The first one I did was a map, after which I painted characters by hand on the street, and then art just with Illustrator. Things got more and more mixed up and the connections between things was lost. But then one day I thought that it would be interesting if we could see them all together. And so five years had passed since I did that first map but I had gone back to doing a map.

❀ Are these the icon stamps used for the maps? They're really cute.

💬 For the small works I use stamps and then silkscreens for the bigger ones. When I did an exhibition I thought I'd have the visitors make a map they liked, so I also exhibited icon and hand-drawn character stamps. I made stamps of Strawberry Fields in Central Park, as well as the Guggenheim, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a yellow cab one. I once had the opportunity to speak with someone from MoMA and I suggested doing a children's workshop with the stamps, but in the end nothing happened. [*Laughs*]
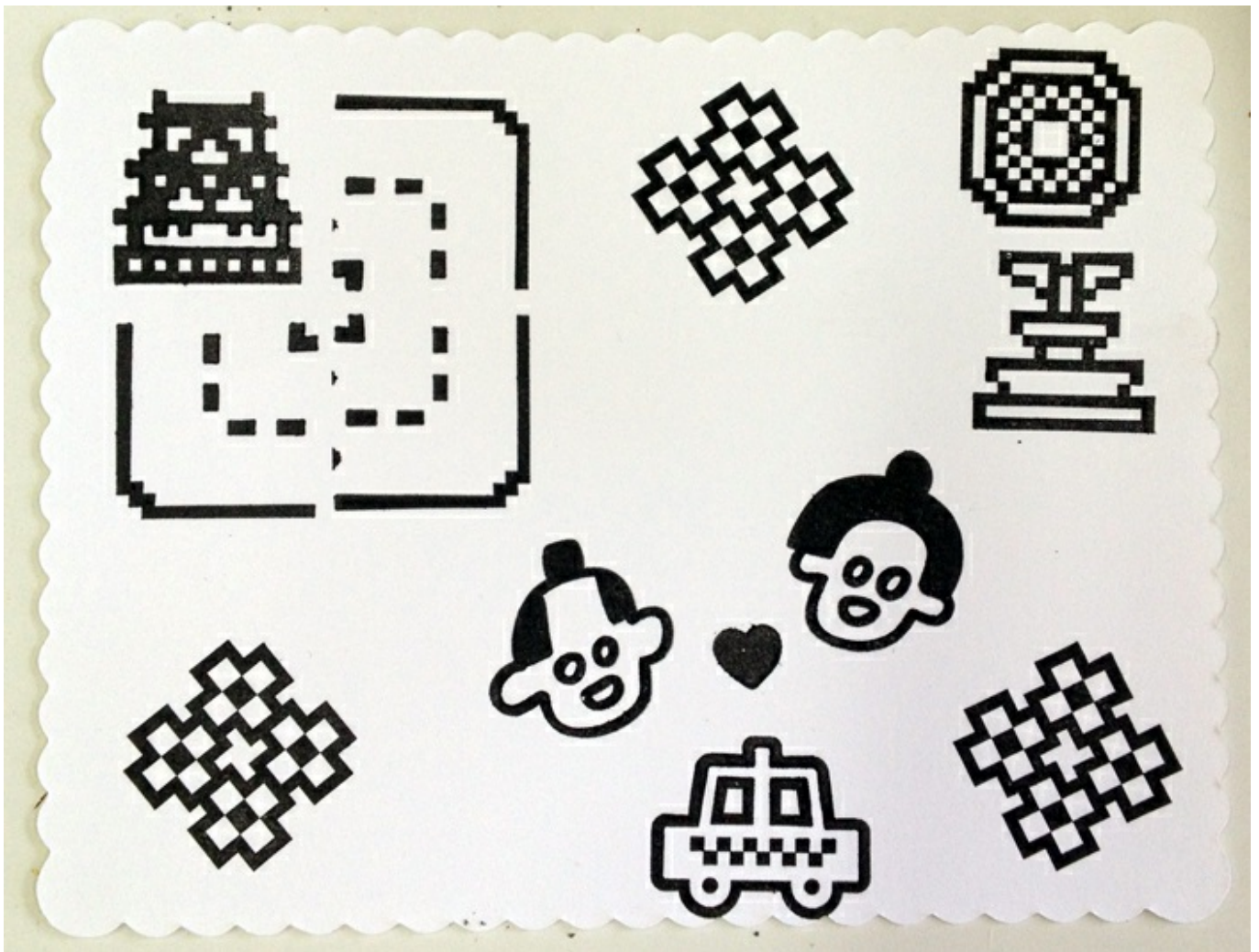
We made a customized card with the stamps!

💬 One of the aims of the map artworks was to make something that the person who buys it can arrange as they like. For example, they can decide how the stamp icons will look, or there could be something like an iPhone app and they could put the icons how they want them and press the order button, and then the size and layout file can arrive at my end. The art world exists in an era of ready-made, but these days it's the internet age where people are using blogs and social media. If we could make it so an individual can customize their order as the next step for art, then I think that would be one interesting direction for things to take. Well, there might well be people already doing this for all I know.

'PUPPY' (2013)
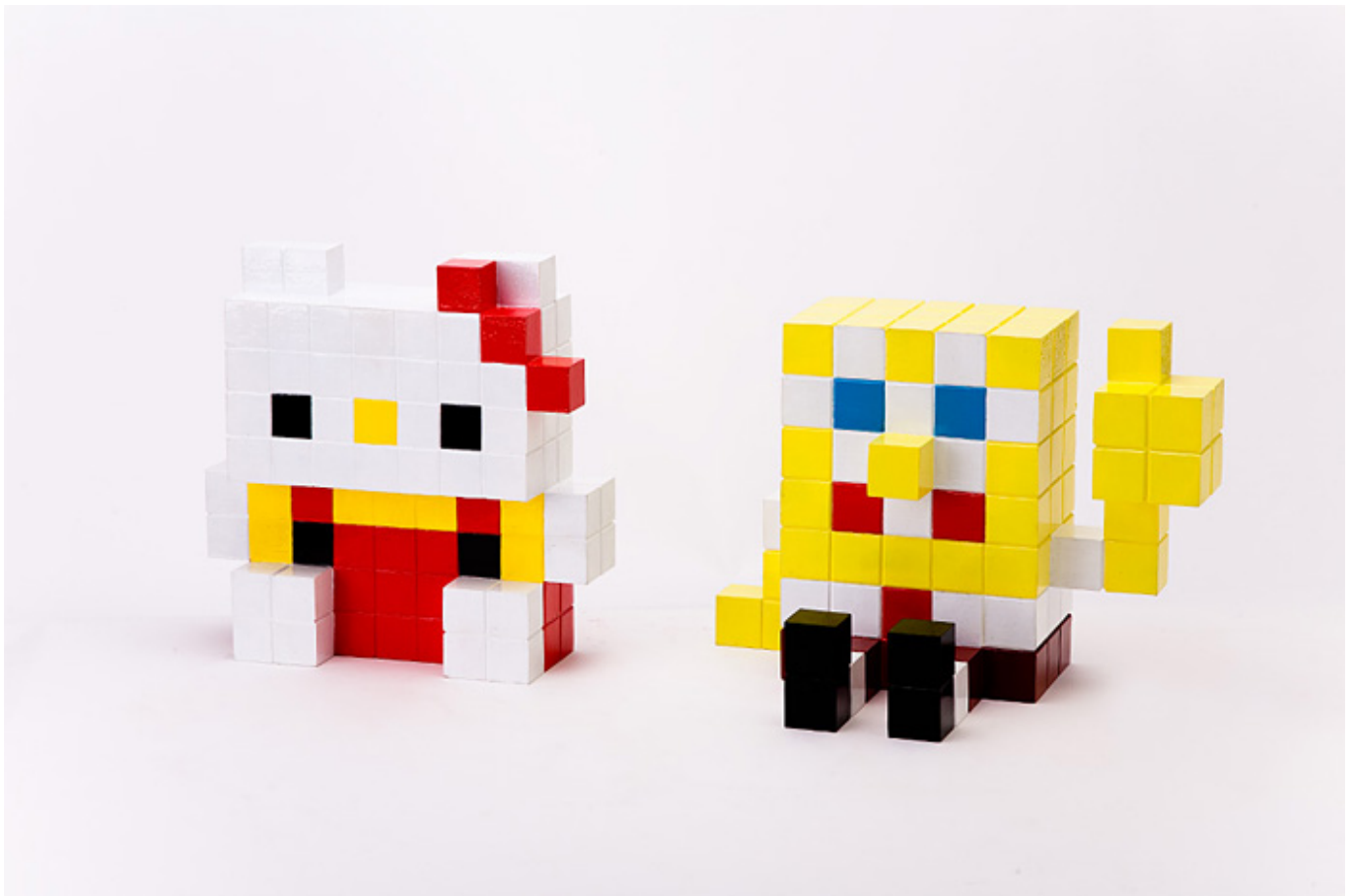
'White Kitten & Yellow Sponge' (2012)

🍁 And you're also making 8-bit sculptures, right?

💬 In the building where I have my studio now there are a few other artists' studios, and we have open studio events

where we open it all up for people to see our work. At the last one all of a sudden I just had to start making 'Huge Puppy' [see main photo at top]. Even though there was almost no time, I just thought, "Stuff it." And I made it. The open studio ended at 7pm and I finished the piece at around 5.30.

If I have nothing special in mind I tend to just want to add on easy colors, and so I was always doing things with video games and 8-bit. But when I looked at the work of artists I respect I didn't really see anything shared between sculptures and paintings. I liked this sense of liberation. I'd always done things with the video games and 8-bit, I'd got fixated on that. So even if I wanted to make a new work I would just think of something along those lines, and it felt like things had got restricted. That's why after I did the maps I made sculptures. Not just 8-bit, I started to use the word "pixel" and make the meaning of what I was doing bigger, working to gradually expand things out.

'Nipple Series (Kim Kardashian, Janet Jackson, Paris Hilton)' (2012)

🍁 **You've made things with dogs, Hello Kitty, McDonalds... How do you decide on the subjects and motifs for your work?**

💬 I don't like it when art is handled like it's something special. Like when you can't enjoy a work of art unless you know art history – well, then it's no fun for ordinary people, is it? That's why I always try to make something almost anyone can enjoy when they look at it, whether it's an old woman or a child. I think being born in Japan, which isn't really well acquainted with modern art, was a big influence on me.

'A Woman And Two Puppies' (2013)

🍁 **That's true, your work could be appreciated even by children. With the colors and shapes, and 8-bit, all the excess information pruned away, it's something that anyone can understand.**

💬 I want people to be able to enjoy my work at just a glance, and then get even more out of it when they know the concepts and ideas behind it. It's a balance of these two. And as much as possible I want to make what I'm doing simple. I keep the elements as minimal as possible and as much as I can I omit anything unnecessary. Whether it's a dog or Hello Kitty, if I wanted to make it more realistic I could, but I want to keep the information to the bare minimum so it can be understood visually. There are other people out there making 8-bit artworks but they are more realist. I want to omit the information as much as possible and make things simpler. The jazz musician Charles Mingus once said, "Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity." That's what I want to do.

✾ While your art can be seen as being very contemporary and Japanese, actually you seem to be held in higher regard by people overseas than in Japan. Is that true?

💬 If I had been appreciated in Japan I wouldn't have come to New York. In Japan I was doing street art for quite some time, but I didn't have any connections so nothing happened, and that's how I ended up coming to New York.

✾ And why did you choose New York?

💬 I was doing street art in Tokyo. I did this giant painting on a billboard in Nakameguro with a two-meter roller. After I finished that up I felt like there was nothing more for me to do in Tokyo. I then went straight to New York for a two-week trip and when I was looking around the galleries in Chelsea, I was really taken aback. "I've gotta come here," I felt. And so I came to New York.

✾ How do you find the different art worlds in Japan and New York?

💬 Everyone just loves art in New York. It's built on top of western culture so art just exists normally in regular life. People enjoy art like it's the obvious thing to do. If you have an open studio, lots of ordinary people come. That's better.
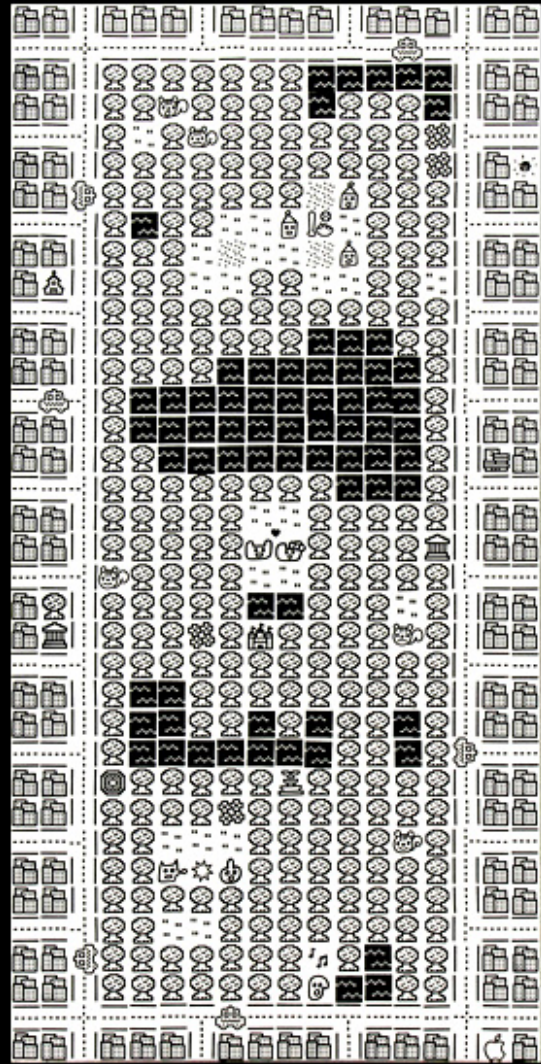
'Central Park (remake)' (2012)

🍁 If you make your living as an artist, you also have to consider art as a business. How do you balance making the things you like and those that will sell?

💬 Long ago I used to only make things I really wanted to, but as I've developed I've come into contact with many people and come to consider the feelings of the market and the buyer. Take my map artworks. Someone who's never played The Legend of Zelda won't understand them. But then take something that exists in reality like Central Park and then make it seem like something from Zelda – and people will be able to understand. Doing this, the response to the Central Park artwork was really good so probably that kind of awareness has gradually become reflected in my artworks. Saying that, I think I'm always searching for this balance, because I can only make things that I too enjoy and I can't just completely make something for another person.

Murakami playing with his 'PUPPY'

🍁 Do you have any exhibitions or plans on the horizon?

💬 I have an open studio again in November, and I think I'll make a smiley out of cardboard and then put it in the street. Something I've finally realized while doing all this is that it's because I found my 8-bit technique after the Eighties that I am able to re-define the things that came before it, like smiley faces, classic shapes like hearts and skulls, everyday fruit and dogs. Making a new artwork using motifs like a smiley face is hard because it's so obvious an image. But I can do it. I've realized that it's probably just a fluke that I found 8-bit, so I want to really give my all when making my next smiley. [*Laughs*]

Thank you, Shinji Murakami! So if you're in New York in November you may well encounter a giant smiley.

Shinji Murakami
http://snz-e.com/

Yuko Matono

RELATED ARTICLES

 EarthBound: from a "reckless" video game to the Hobonichi Planner

 YMCK: Aesthetics For The 8bit Generation