OTAKU: WHO ARE YOU?

Tracing the shifting meanings of otaku,
from the 1980s to the present day.

Above: Cosplayer Tanya dresses as Ryuko Matoi from the anime *Kill la Kill*. Opposite page: Fans come out in force for Nipponbashi Street Festa, the largest cosplay event in Osaka.

Otaku. The meaning may seem obvious enough. But it's worthwhile reflecting on what exactly it is we think we know. The assumption of knowledge tends to close down critical inquiry and reinforce stereotypes, after all, and this is particularly problematic when it comes to otaku because the media has played such an important role in setting the parameters of discussion. With its dense web of popular print publications and television shows, Japan is extremely adept at creating media events and phenomena. From herbivore boys to *hikikomori* (a term used to describe those who avoid social contact), there is an endless cycle of new identities, fashions, and social issues. Much of this is self-referential, and, through citation and repetition, these media fictions and fantasies transform into so-called realities.

The word otaku literally means "your home," and is used in some settings as a second-person pronoun. In Japan during the early 1980s, however, it began to be associated with the perceived excesses and perversions of people with obsessive interests. Terms such as *fan* (*fanjin*, fanzine) and *maniac* (manga mania, manga maniac) were already in circulation, but otaku was meant to refer to something different: something strange, weird, wrong, and/or abnormal about certain fans and maniacs.

An early examination of the term appeared in a series of articles in *Manga Burikko*, a comics magazine targeting fans of cute girl characters, an audience which in many ways defined otaku. From June to August 1983, in his *Otaku no kenkyū* (*Otaku Research*) column, writer Nakamori Akio called out unfashionable and obsessive fans, deriding practices such as attending fanzine conventions, costuming as characters, and lining up overnight for the release of animated films. While Nakamori labeled everyone from trainspotters to idol chasers–men and women of all shapes and sizes with varied interests–as otaku, the bulk of his criticism was reserved for male fans of manga/anime-style cute girl characters. Describing such men as having a "two-dimensional complex" (*nijigen konpurekkusu*), he called them "gross" and "faggy," fueling a backlash amongst some readers.

For his part, the editor of *Manga Burikko*, Ōtsuka Eiji, saw Nakamori's name-calling and line drawing as an extension of what Ōtsuka described as the "game of differentiation." In the heady media-commodity system and