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JAPANESE VIDEO: REMEMBERING AN ART OF MEMORY

[Part One of a Three-Part Series]

Japan, the Land of Video--or is it? When was the last time you recall seeing something really creative done here in video? Even harder, when was the first time? For despite Japan's dominance in the world video hardware market for almost a quarter of a century, video culture has for the most part happened abroad. There are definite reasons for this--notably Japan's lack of funding for contemporary art, media art included, as compared to the support it received in the West--yet Japan is not without its own lineage of artistic expression in video. It forms an almost forgotten history, now entering its twentieth year.

Video is itself memory--storage and retrieval--simultaneously improving and rendering into oblivion with each technological advancement. In retrospect, distinct "generations" of video practitioners can be discerned in relation to the state of the art, what was or was not possible at the time, together with the associated aesthetics. To go back to the beginnings of independent videowork means looking at a largely different medium: bulky open-reel decks, low-resolution cameras, no editing, no special effects.

Background, names and dates. At first, the emergence of a video movement proves more striking than any individual works. Video came on the Japanese art scene in the avantgarde happenings of the late '60s. Artists were eager to experiment with anything new, and although prohibitively expensive, video seemed amply suited for recording live action and for spontaneous visualisation through an "externalised eye." As early as 1968, Toshio Matsumoto of Kyushu College of Art and Technology staged a live event with video, *Magnetic Scramble*. By 1969, 8mm

and 16mm filmmakers and Mono-ha conceptualists were producing tapes; among the first to take camera in hand were Takahiko Iimura of Tokyo, Akira Matsumoto of Osaka, and Keigo Yamamoto of Fukui.

The first Japanese video generation, however, really dates from the watershed year 1972, when Canadian Michael Goldberg of the Vancouver-based Satellite Video Exchange came to Japan to establish contacts for his *International Video Exchange* directory. Japan was a "black hole" on the video map: already exporting new technologies in hardware, yet who knew what the Japanese themselves were doing in the medium? The surprising truth was they were doing almost nothing--yet. Goldberg quickly took up the cause and switched roles from information gatherer to transmitter, drawing on his own experience in the West. Answering Goldberg's call at his Video Communication Do It Yourself Kit workshop-exhibition at the Ginza Sony Building were a more than a dozen artists who were to become the most passionate proponents of video throughout the '70s: Katsuhiro Yamaguchi, Nobuhiro Kawanaka, Fujiko Nakaya, Sakumi Hagiwara and Hakudo Kobayashi, plus most of the names already mentioned, forming the collective Video Hiroba (Video Commons). Hovering at the periphery were maverick film animator Ko Nakajima's group, Video Earth, established at the end of 1971, and Ichiro Tezuka's Video Information Center, founded in 1974 for archival taping of theatre and other cultural events.

Further momentum was added to the energy of these three groups by incoming shows such as John Reilly and Rudi Stern's American Video Show at the Tokyo American Center in 1973 and Shigeko Kubota's Tokyo-New York Video Express at the Tenjosajikikan Theatre in 1974, as well as by opportunities to participate in video festivals abroad. A flurry of activity ensued, with Japanese artists doing everything from holding solo and group video shows in galleries, to championing video entries in art exhibitions, to organising symposia on and via

video, to staging "video picnics" and other video fieldwork.

Videoworks in these early days often had a narcissistic quality, as it featured the artist—"the cheapest model in town"—or immediate family and friends. Many pieces were conceived as situations to precipitate some perceptual dislocation: realtime video relays linked otherwise isolated environments; tape delays and loops skewed expectations of synchronous time; feedback patterns were built up by aiming the camera at its own monitor output; virtual space "inside" the screen was set equivalent or in paradox to real space. These experiments may not sound like much now, but remember, this was long before the video-in-every-household Japan of today. Imagine encountering the television you had always passively watched, suddenly turned around and actively mirroring you. It was revolutionary at the time, if self-consciously so. Meanwhile, we see the advent of electronic image processing—"video effects"—as Toshio Matsumoto's tape *Mona Lisa* (1973) set a smiling Gioconda against various synthetically coloured backgrounds.

The times were highly politicised, of course, and many committed artists saw video as an open door for people to "take media into their own hands." By the mid-'70s, ideas of Guerilla Television, after the American hands-on manual of the same name (trans. Fujiko Nakaya, 1974), and community action cable television and video projects had come to the fore. Fujiko Nakaya's 1972 documentation of a sit-in by Minamata mercury-poisoning victims and her communications project *Renewal of Regional Life and Culture* (1975-76) are exemplary of such videowork.

Most of these developments were also visible simultaneously or earlier in American, Canadian and European video. The question arises: what, if anything was unique to the Japanese video scene of the '70s? Many Western observers have have projected a special "Japanese-ness" on video here and analysed each work

to death, dredging Japan's art history as far back as *noh* and *ukiyo-e* in search of a continuous aesthetic tradition. An effort which, to paraphrase a famous dictum on contemporary Japanese printmaking, seems about as reasonable as expecting Scottish art to come in tartans and bagpipes. True, certain Japanese videomakers have their subtly-shaded *sabi* filters: witness Keigo Yamamoto's series of explorations into traditional percepts *ki* "vital breath" and *ma* "open interval." But no matter how pre-programmed the cultural vision, the fact remains that Japanese video of the '70s was hard-wired by more immediate social and technological circumstances. The entire medium was new and ungrounded, hence marginal and difficult; the whole stance was avantgarde and underground, hence impromptu and make-do (in the mid-'70s, Nobuhiro Kawanaka and colleague Katsu Tomiyama even founded a media workshop under the name Japan Underground Film Center—now known as Image Forum).

In this country of working within limits, "typically Japanese" constraints pre-empted possibilities. The paradigm to keep in mind here is "fine-tuning" on a television: if you couldn't change channels on the set, you played with minute adjustments as your entire range of options until they became all-important. What independent Japanese videomakers did was largely determined by how they could get anything done at all. Without the support of arts councils and private foundations or access to sophisticated video equipment, they did not venture into advanced experiments in editing as did their counterparts in the West. So conversely, the capital-intensive mode of production, polished look and narrative ideas of broadcast television were not consistent with "true art" or "radical vision." Japanese video effectively pruned itself down to simple gesture, planar composition, stark portayals of the qualities of physical materials, and camera-eye sketches of the immediate living environment.

Videowork along these lines then replicated within the limits of the stolid

Japanese social heirarchy. Perpetuation by pattern, master to pupil. Many first-generation videomakers went on to teaching positions at universities--Katsuhiko Yamaguchi at Tsukuba University, Fujiko Nakaya at Nihon University, Sakumi Hagiwara at Tama Art University--a process which at once legitimised and territorialised the Japanese video scene. It is even arguable that the latter half of the '70s was so given over to getting established that there was no room for a "second generation" immediately following these *sensei*. The next real boom in Japanese video had to wait until the '80s and the third video generation--but enough straining the limits of memory for now.

JAPANESE VIDEO: THE RISE AND FALL OF 'VIDEO ART'

[Part Two of a Three-Part Series]

The term "video art" divides generations. No sooner was video established as an art, than a counter-revolution was underway among the students of the very artists who had first laboured to gain the medium recognition. This third video generation of the '80s was some twenty years younger on the average than their late-'60s avantgarde teachers. There had been no "second generation"; no real innovators to take the revolutionary ends of their immediate seniors and subordinate them as means toward further aesthetic ends (with the possible exception of such isolated technicians-turned-artists Shinsuke Ina and Yasuo Shinohara, or filmmakers Mako Idemitsu, Mao Kawaguchi, and Nakai Tsuneo who edged into video in the mid-'70s but only came to prominence later).

Instead, front-line reinforcements had been brought in from abroad in the persons of American Bill Viola and Korean-born New York-resident Nam June Paik. From 1978 on into the early '80s, these two major figures on the international video circuit were frequent visitors to Japan. Paik, a Tokyo University graduate and one of the first artists ever to work in video (claims run back as far as 1963), held annual one-man shows at Galerie Watari as well as other special events sponsored by the Tokyo American Center and Sony, culminating in his large-scale solo exhibition at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1984. Viola had participated in the 1978 International Video Art Exhibition at Sogetsu Hall, did a number of shows and was likewise favoured by Sony during a year's stay on a Japan-U.S. Artist Exchange Fellowship.

The tapeworks of Viola and Paik were taught as "video art," making them the definitive exemplars for art students learning video. So much so that we can

recognise two definite lines of influence: Viola's numinous meditations on light, time and perception inspired hundreds of hours of fixed framing, slow zooms and subtle distortions of the visual field; while Paik's slapdash Pop and irreverent media trickery translated into fast-frame editing, processed imagery and synthetic techno-colours. The emotive Viola School and playful Paik School dominated early '80s video in a way that can only be compared to Japanese schooling patterns around *enka* "mood ballads" and *kayokyoku* "teen tunes" in the world of popular music.

The problem was that for the post-Punk generation (music clips were being shown in music clubs as early as 1978), "video art" invoked the protected high-culture atmosphere of museums, arts festivals and galleries. "Chairs lined up in a dark room," as more than one young videomaker has disparaged the term.

The "dark room" in Japan was Harajuku's Video Gallery Scan, founded in 1980 by Fujiko Nakaya and named by Bill Viola. A small one-room operation combining office, tape library and showing space, funded entirely out of Nakaya's pocket, for the first half of the '80s, this was the epicenter and launching pad for Japanese "video art." Nakaya's impact on the Japanese video scene of the early '80s cannot be underestimated. Nearly all of the third video generation were "discovered" via the spring and autumn Scan competitions: Naoko Kurozuka, Daizaburo Harada, Ritsu Ogawa, Makoto Saito, Yoshinobu Kurokawa--the list goes on and on. Still others got their first hands-on video experience at a Scan workshop. Scan (and to a lesser extent the primarily film-oriented Image Forum in Yotsuya) was the only outlet for anyone doing independent videowork.

Certainly Scan was about the only place in Tokyo where you could go to see regularly scheduled video screenings. American-educated Nakaya had strong ties with New York video centre Electronic Arts Intermix and the Museum of Modern Art (where Video from Tokyo to Fukui and Kyoto, the first overseas exhibition

dedicated to Japanese video was held in 1979); she had very American ideas of linking together local museums and galleries throughout Japan into a Video Art Network for touring shows. Scan maintained a wide catalogue of American videoworks and was a port of call for many foreign videomakers including Australian Peter Callas in 1983 and American Gary Hill during his 1984 Japan-U.S. Artist Exchange Fellowship. Paradoxically, however, Nakaya was on another wavelength from more immediate trends right in Scan's backyard.

Energy had started to build behind video as the coming thing. "A young medium for young people." If this sounds like commercial copy, it is because certain concerns were beginning to awaken to the potentials of video—or rather of *eizo* "visuals," a catch-all gloss of electronic images as consumable surface. Not surprising in a society where television advertisements aspire to art, more households have VCRs than anywhere else in the world, and promotional pageants are a national passion. Of course, from 1978 on JVC convened its annual Tokyo Video Festival to showcase home-format amateur video. But it was the video exhibition held at the 1981 Kobe Portopia, a gala pavilionland with no other particular purchase on art, that signaled video's "coming out." Soon video would become synonymous with crowd-pleasing flash and moving-wallpaper imagery.

The boom was on. In 1982, the promotional agency Engine Room set up Gallery Spoon (complete with a spoon graphic culled from Duchamp) to appeal to a young trendy crowd. Where Scan had been hidden away, an enclave of dedicated videogoers, Spoon was in the heart of the Shibuya shopping district, packaged as a "video club" (as was Daily Planet in Harajuku, right around the corner from Scan). Spoon's kick-off tape and performance programme was the ebulliently overtitled Video Age Power, including works by university students Yoshitaka Shimano, Hironori Terai and others. Yet the "video age" remained only a gleam in promoters' eyes; crowds failed to materialise and Spoon was washed up in

little over a year, just as Brian Eno's audio-visual installation show at La Foret Akasaka, Laurie Anderson's first Japan tour and Paik's Tokyo Met exhibition were about to focus public attention on creative media.

Rather it was the initiatives of the third video generation themselves that best characterised Japanese video of the early '80s. Young videomakers began to sour on the established "video art" scene and wanted to do things for themselves. Everyone seemed to be in some independent video group, but only a few left lasting a lasting mark. In 1982, Rieko Kanazawa, Seigen Kyu and Yasuyuki Yamaguchi set out to document music performances under the title Scanning Pool. The following year, Hiroya Sakurai, Keiko Sei, Shimano and Terai joined their ranks to organise Scanning Pool 2, a live music-with-video programme at La Foret Harajuku, which proved the first offering of what to be come known in today's industry as "AV Live" events.

That following year 1984 brought the mass alignment of twenty-four young videomakers, many already mentioned, under the banner Video Cocktail. They rented space for their first annual group show at Komai Gallery, with video-performances at Studio 200, and after considerable difficulties managed to release a compilation of their tapeworks for sale on home videocassette. This move toward collective promotion and self-distribution attempted to jolt the big electronics corporations into recognising the efforts of local videomakers (even granted that three Video Cocktail members, Michiko Amari, Mao Kawaguchi and Kumiko Kushiyama received newly-established Video Scholarships from JVC-- since discontinued).

In 1985, Video Cocktail II moved to the more up-market Roppongi exhibition space Newz, while the 1986 Video Cocktail III went on to fill the entire Hara Museum of Contemporary Art (a private institution notable for its policy of holding at least one video show a year and purchasing videowork for its

collection). Video Cocktail III was very well attended, but it was to be their last exhibition as a group. In addition to video installations and tapeworks by member artists--now numbering only eighteen--there were invited guest contributions: small programmes of independent music clips, works by senior videomakers, works by foreign resident videomakers (including myself), and media performances by Takashi Asai's Uplink Theatre troupe --*Rain*, a massive outdoor incendiary spectacle of book-burning and flaming televisions--and by Koharu Kisaragi--a self-styled Japanese Laurie Anderson whose *Poker* featured a synchronised five-monitor computer graphic display by Cocktail hostess Naoko Tosa. But it was the menu served up by Hiroya Sakurai that really hit home: a selection of tapes by fourth video generation artists entitled "Kids Who Never Heard of Bill Viola." Where could Japanese video go from here?

JAPANESE VIDEO: ARTISTS COME OUT OF THE BOX

[Part Three of as Three-Part Series]

In 1985, Video Curator Barbara London writes in her introductory essay to an exhibition catalogue:

In Japan, a country among the most advanced technologically in the world, where nearly everyone is considered an artist and art is part of everyone's life, the capacity for video's growth is enormous.
(*New Video: Japan*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

Not three years later, the independent video group Ring World rents exhibition space at the Osaki '0' Museum for a show with the grim title:

Is There a Video Future or Not?

Are we talking about the same country? The same video medium? The reality must fall somewhere between these extremes of techno-mania and artist-depression.

The real issue here is the "state of the artist" in contemporary Japanese society. For despite the triumph of the Japanese economy, no appreciable benefits have accrued in the cultural sector, nor correspondingly do we see any blossoming of the arts. Furthermore, the lack hardly seems to matter at all--no one would miss contemporary art except the artists themselves. Fine art, as such, really has no place in today's Japan. The idea of art for art's sake just never existed in the first place (much less tax incentives for art support), and art in general plays no critical social role here.

Consider, then, the fate of "fringe" expressions in electronic media: there is simply no economic context for the expense of video production as art; no cultural basis by which a Japanese public will appreciate videowork as art.

Herein lies the root of the "video generation gap" between the vacuum tube *sensei* who insist on doing "video art" and the integrated circuit kids who are looking in other directions through video. These new directions are many and various, diverging on such points as video's stance toward television, crossovers into other art genres and the search for viable social standing.

One of the earliest and by now most established alternatives saw video as an on-going process of communication posed somewhere between art and literature. Two or more persons send "video letters" back and forth, recording a response to each previous tape. Less concerned with finished product, thus requiring a different frame of mind than for the planning and making of a work for exhibition, the video letter has a large following in Japan and has sometimes been compared to Japanese *renga* "linked verse" in conception. The most well-known examples are the *Video Letter* (1981) exchanged between poet Shuntaro Tanikawa and playwright-filmmaker Shuji Terayama and the *K&K Video Letter* (1984) between young videomakers Yoshinobu Kurokawa and Yohani Kibe.

But by far the great majority of recent Japanese videowork is concerned with technique and achieving a "look." Form-as-content in the hands of the artisan. (Or as one Canadian curator put it, "Japanese video isn't *about* anything, is it?") Such videowork largely relates to graphic design and illustration, two applied arts of ready acceptance in Japan. This is the basic model of video as a popular decorative medium, not far removed from the cute animation, expansive landscapes and eclectic fantasies of broadcast television "image" commercials, arguably the true media artform here in Japan.

Not surprisingly, many young third generation videomakers have gone into television and promotional work. Some, such as ex-Video Cocktail duo Daizaburo Harada and Haruhiko Shono, better known as Radical TV, have gone big time, collaborating with the likes of pop musician Ryuichi Sakamoto and staging a

video-music performance *TV War* on the massive Sony outdoor video screen at Tsukuba Expo '85. Others have gone into independent programming: ex-Cocktail tenders Yasuyuki Yamaguchi and Mao Kawaguchi now work with young television and promo-video director Hiroyuki Nakano's blade-runner-esque Tyrell Corporation. Artists everywhere have always gone where the money is, and in this age of spectacle, the art is truly in "entertaining ourselves to death."

The most compelling entertainment with something more than the usual gratuitous use of video, however, is to be found in the media-performances of Teiji Furuhashi's Kyoto-based Dumb Type Theatre. Combining structuralist rigour with prime-time absurdist flair, their latest production *036 - Pleasure Life* (1986) at the Kyoto alternative space Mumonkan drew full houses. Tokyo audiences will be treated to their first exposure to Dumb Type at the NTT HaraJuku Quest building opening at the end of May before they leave for the New York International Festival of the Arts and a European tour this summer.

Another exciting direction that also challenges "boxed image" video is recently emerging in truly sculptural video environments and installations. Moving away from the "box-on-box" mountains of technology of early multi-monitor displays now commonplace in discos and advertising, video elements are now incorporated into whole thematic tableaux. This is again indicative of a reaction against a unidimensional "video art" set apart from sculpture, painting and other plastic arts, in favour of artworks that happen to include video as the statement or presentation requires. Moreover, unlike tapeworks which demand that the captive audience submit to a pre-determined timeframe, video installations can be experienced at the viewer's own pace as with work in more traditional arts; while the very fact that these works have to be experienced in person finally puts an end to the big video question "TV or not TV."

Decidedly the most accomplished Japanese practitioner in video installation is

Hiroya Sakurai, another familiar name from the Video Cocktail group. His socio-critical *TV Terrorist* will be on view at the upcoming 2nd Fukui International Video Biennale this March 12-21 at the Fukui Prefectural Museum of Art (0776-25-0451), a major international show to include tapes and installations from five countries--recommended for videophiles and novices alike. Simultaneously, Sakurai will be exhibiting a video installation here in Tokyo in the Hara Annual at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art (03-445-0651), March 12-May 8.

So, "Where can we go to see video?" In addition to the above special events, the Hara Museum holds regular showings of a limited number of tapes from its collection and Video Gallery Scan (03-470-2664) is reviving its monthly shows. Newer developments include plans by Ring World (03-407-8008) to host monthly artist discussion-screenings toward a programme of intermedia workshops. Then in November comes the opening of the Kawasaki Civic Museum, which will house an open-access videotape library. Hopefully all will provide enjoyable opportunities to learn.

Education works two ways, though. There is a video future, but not without greater public interest and support, and not without artists making more concerted efforts to expand their own horizons. If Japan is the look of the future, then Japan has to take a more active interest in its own video culture, not just leave it to the rest of the world.