

Japanese Video: Remembering An Art Of Memory

By Alfred Birnbaum

In time for the opening of the 2nd Fukui International Video Biennale (March 12-21, Fukui Prefectural Museum of Art, 0776-23-0451) and the video installation that will be part of the Hara Annual (March 12-May 8, Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 03-443-0651), Monday Arts begins a three-part series on video art. Alfred Birnbaum is one of the editors of the seventh edition of *Infernal*, the first International magazine on videocassettes, which will be published in Japan this year.

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 has 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 20th 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 avant garde 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 visualization through an "externalized 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

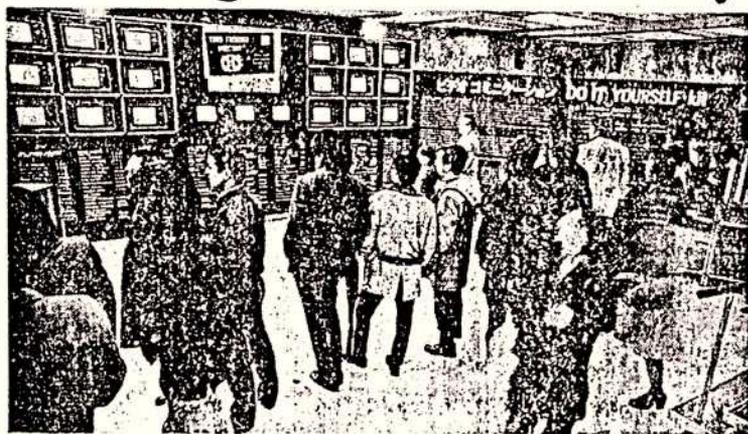
dates from the watershed year 1972, when Canadian Michael Goldberg of the Vancouver-based Satellite Video Exchange came to Japan to establish contacts for his International Video Exchange directory. Japan was a "black hole" on the video map: already exporting new technologies in hardware, yet who knew 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 more than a dozen artists who were to become the most passionate proponents of video throughout the '70s: Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, Nobuhiro Kawana, 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 theater and other cultural events.

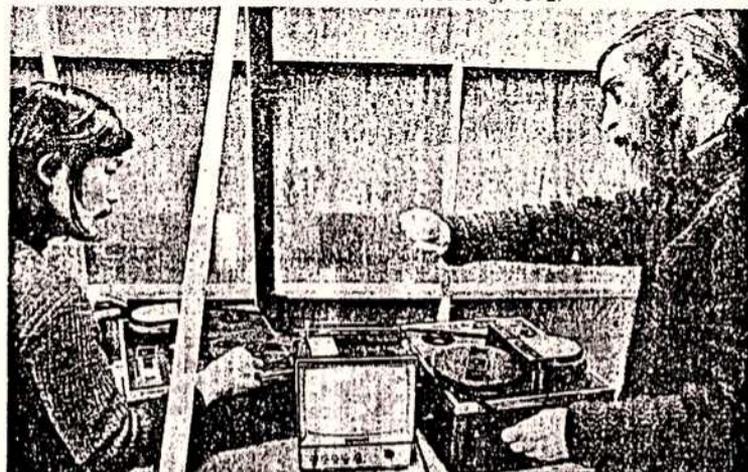
Momentum

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 Shigeo Kubota's Tokyo-New York Video Express at the Tenjosa Jikkai Theater 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 organizing 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



Video Communication Do It Yourself Kit, Sony Building, 1972.



Michael Goldberg instructing Nobuhiro Kawana on open-reel video decks at the Video Communication Do It Yourself Kit.

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 colored backgrounds.

Politicized

The times were highly politicized, 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 Guerrilla 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 any-

thing, was unique to the Japanese video scene of the 70s? Many Western observers have projected a special "Japaneseness" on video here and analyzed 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 precepts *ki* (vital breath) and *ma* (open interval). But no matter how preprogrammed 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 avant garde and underground, hence impromptu and make-do (in the mid-'70s, Nobuhiro Kawana 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 possibil-

ities. 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 portrayals of the qualities of physical materials, and camera-eye sketches of the immediate living environment.

Replicated

Videowork along these lines then replicated within the limits of the stolid Japanese social hierarchy: 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 legitimized and territorialized 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 of straining the limits of memory for now.