

Within one week after arriving in Japan for a planned stay of one year, a chance meeting with a French woman on an outing to Lake Chuzenji led to introductions to a number of contemporary video artists. During my second week, I went to see a performance by British artist Bruce McLean at Tokyo's LaForet Museum where I was introduced to group of video artists—Japanese, Canadian, American and English. Throughout my eighteen months of residence in Japan I had the opportunity to learn about Japanese video art, the artists making it and how they do it. As is my habit, I made notes of my experience and observations. These are the source materials for this article, although they may not be comprehensive nor were they made for the purpose of reporting.

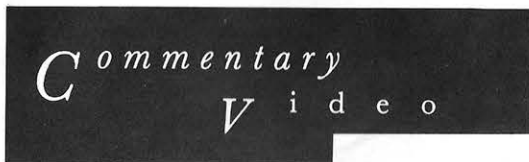
Exhibition

The performance of Bruce McLean at LaForet Museum was the first in a series presented by the American Center in Tokyo, which included the artists Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Giulio Paolini and Joseph Beuys. Both the McLean and the Graham events contained video elements. McLean used, as I recall, a ten monitor installation. The equipment was provided by one of the manufacturers of video equipment in Tokyo. During the year and a half I spent in Japan, this was the only exhibition at LaForet which featured artists using video. The relationship among arts organizations like the American Center, individual artists, and companies such as Sony and JVC is very interesting and unique. As I was to learn, relationships between video artists and such companies are, for artists, a means of making video works and exposing them to the public.

In addition to this single exhibition of performance/video I found work in video at a number of museums, galleries, and video manufacturers' showrooms. In Tokyo, the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art has been showing video tapes by international artists for about three years. This past autumn they held an exhibition in three separate screening rooms of twenty video works curated by Barbara London of New York's Museum of Modern Art. Also, the Tokyo National Museum of Modern Art's 1983 biennial competition had a separate category for video art work, although this exhibition seems to be the only showing of video works in this museum.

Of the three museums mentioned above, two have almost exclusively shown video works made outside of Japan. Considering the small number of outlets for video art in practically any country, this situation has troubled many Japanese video artists. In fact, I found that work of Western artists, in general, is given a very warm reception in Japan. Some Japanese artists are frustrated with the obvious ease with which foreign artists can penetrate the "art scene" while they struggle to become recognized in their own country and do not always find a warm reception in the West. However, in spite of this undercurrent of dissatisfaction, such topics are not brought out directly in conversations but the feelings are conveyed in more subtle ways.

There is one video gallery in Tokyo devoted to the art form. It is video gallery SCAN, run by artist Fujiko Nakaya. It is a small, intimate space where a regular program of video art works can be seen. In addition, SCAN holds semi-annual spring and fall competitions for video works which allow younger artists and those without sponsorship to have their work shown. SCAN fills an important role in making video art available and serves as a center for the community of artists interested in video. Nakaya also runs Processart, the only video art distribution service in Japan. Also in Tokyo, the galleries Maki and Tamura continue to include video in their exhibition program. These galleries however fall into the category of rental spaces which cost the artist between \$500 and \$600 per individual show. There are other galleries in which one could show. However, in addition to the rental fee there would be the cost of equipment rental. The expenses involved in showing work and the costs of producing a video tape are the difficulties younger artists face.



Contemporary Video Art in Japan

One of the surprising associations one finds in Japan is between the department store and the art gallery. Most of the major department stores in Japan have a gallery for art on one of their upper floors. These galleries are not pseudo-galleries but important and established centers for circulating and viewing art exhibitions. In branch stores outside of Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and other large cities these galleries usually display traditional and "modern painting" by regional artists. At Seibu department store in Tokyo, Gallery 200 has been the host to both video and film events and festivals and is a good place to see experimental work in both media.

Another excellent facility, which up until April of this year functioned as one of the few regular viewing spaces for video, was JICS Plaza, the Japan Intercultural Communication Society. Curator of their video program, Michael Goldberg, ran a monthly Friday evening screening series featuring video artists. It was through JICS activities that I was able to get a view of the work being done in video. This program was just one of the Society's many activities. It was unfortunately curtailed this year for budgetary reasons. This program was the only one I know of which brought artists and their work together with an audience, paid the artists, and offered an informal bilingual discussion forum complete with refreshments. Michael Goldberg has, for the past ten years, been an important figure in the Japanese video community and a strong supporter of video artwork and artists. As early as 1972 he and a group of artists formed Video Hiroba, a collective which purchased its own portapak and within which members helped each other with projects. Goldberg recently completed a new video work called *Fast Foods Tokyo* which was screened at the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art last fall, and he is currently working on a tape based on the birth of his first child.

Since the mid 1970's some artists have been able to obtain free video equipment and/or facilities from manufacturers provided they permit their work to be shown at public events or fairs where the manufacturers display their hardware. Sony has a gallery which has displayed the work of artists it has helped support. These works have included installations and works in which viewers can participate. The annual JVC Video Festival is funded by the Japan Victor Corporation. Throughout most of the year the video tapes of the winners can be seen in a room behind the JVC showroom in a section of Tokyo called Toranomon. These events are publicized by the manufacturers.

Artists

Keigo Yamamoto lives in the small coastal town of Fukui, an eight hour train ride from Tokyo. Yamamoto was one of the first artists in Japan to work in video. The first exhibition of his video tapes was in 1972 at Gallery 16 in Kyoto. He has since shown his work internationally and received much support from Sony. Yamamoto works on his tapes at his home where he is also a high school teacher and a farmer. He is one of the most devoted and driven artists with whom I had the pleasure to become more familiar. He has also been an important figure in establishing video as a recognized art in Japan. Yamamoto's choice of video as an expressive form has to do with his interest in exploring the ideas of space and interval. He uses the Japanese terms "ma" and "ki" to

describe these concepts. In a screening held at JICS plaza in February of 1983, he talked about aspects of spatial division in Japanese visual aesthetics as having a strong affect on his perceptions of boundaries and divisions between ourselves and others or ourselves and our environment. He used, as an example the Japanese straw mats, "tatami," an element in traditional architecture which determine the size of a room by the number of mats used. He also talked about the use of the "shoji," sliding paper screens, as an architectural device for visually and psychologically enlarging an enclosed space so that an exterior space is made to feel like one that is interior. He spoke about the Japanese tendency to integrate natural forms such as mountains and lakes into their daily visual lives by miniaturizing them in the form of gardens containing rocks, water and other natural objects. In his video work, he is trying to explore some of the concepts. He employs tape delays, multi-monitor installations and interactive situations with his viewers using pre-recorded imagery and live camera input.

In November of 1982 I met Mako Idemitsu and saw four of her video tapes at JICS plaza. Mako Idemitsu is an award winning experimental filmmaker and video artist who has been working with video since 1974. She lived in the United States for ten years and began making tapes after she returned to Tokyo in 1972. Although her work has been described as feminist in nature, the terminology has a political ring which does not seem to predominate in most of her work. Her interests center around exploring aspects of women's lives and their conscious and unconscious behavior. Her works seem in general to be non-narrative yet they have an internal structure which tends to serve as a device that holds the pieces together.

In her tape *Another Day of A Housewife*, she creates a fictional video diary of a woman going about her daily activities while being watched by a ever-present eye on a small TV set. The eye seems to function partly as the audience and partly as the third person of the woman in the tape; and in a curious way the artist succeeds in establishing an empathy between the viewer and the woman. In *Shadows*, a Jungian term for which this tape is named, Idemitsu deals with the theory of "the dark side our character which we usually project onto someone we don't like of the same sex."

Kou Nakajima has been working with combinations of technology as an artist since the mid sixties. He is known internationally for his animation *Biological Cycle*, incorporating film animation techniques with video special effects. His two-monitor video tape, *My Life*, documenting his mother's funeral and his daughter's birth was included in the 1979 *Video from Tokyo to Fukui and Kyoto* touring exhibition curated by Barbara London. And recently as an artist-in residence at the Western Front in Vancouver, he finished his tape *Mandala*, both a document and a performance of the creation of a giant mandala from grains of colored sand. Nakajima's works, whether autobiographical or stem-



ming from his interest in image generation, are consistently pristine and of impeccable quality. Currently and for the past two years he has been working with JVC in the development of a computer video animation system called the "Aniputer." Described by JVC in their prototype literature, "Aniputer, a newborn video system component, creates pictures and real-time animations on a TV screen with the aid of a high-speed microcomputer. Combined with VTRs and TV cameras, it also works as a video mixer and a super-imposer . . ." He is currently developing his own animation using this new tool.

Toshio Matsumoto and Yasuo Shinohara had exhibitions of their work at SCAN gallery in October of 1983. Both artists have a strong structural approach to their work and see their work in video very much related to the ongoing history of art in traditional media. While video, because of its portability and immediacy, has often been used thematically by artists to deal with aspects of daily life, Matsumoto is more concerned with the formal video image. Both he and Shinohara are interested in the specific images they construct and their own unique visual language.

Naoko Kurotsuka, a winner of the SCAN competition for new video, and Masaki Fujihata had a joint screening of their work at JICS Plaza. Both artists are new to the medium. Kurotsuka's tapes depict a delicate, dreamlike world of mysterious appearance and disappearance, of reflections and pastoral scenes. Fujihata works with computer animated imagery and has created tapes which appear to be technically sophisticated yet visually simple and compelling.

Much of the new video work being made by younger artists in Japan seems to have a great deal in common with work in the States and Europe. There are few art schools in Japan that offer courses in video making and as a result it seems that most of the learning occurs after graduation. Relying on the traditional art backgrounds which they receive in art school, students then apply this training to video.

Summary

I have not mentioned much about the work of artists of other nationalities living in Japan because my intent has been to focus on Japanese artists. There is however a good sized, though transitory, community of non-Japanese video artists centered mostly in Tokyo, and they contribute to the vitality of the community. While the potential for a wider exposure and a growing acceptance of video art work exists, it is uncertain whether or how this will develop. Both Sony and JVC have helped artist pursue their work and there may eventually be more involvement from the manufacturing industry. As video becomes more recognized, more outlets in museums may become available for its exposure. It will take some time though for the more traditionally oriented curatorial staff to be accepting. It is very encouraging in any case to see the growing activity and work in this form that is coming from Japan.

Ellen Kozak is a video artist who received support from Sony and JVC during her 1 1/2-year stay in Japan. She extends special thanks to Michael Goldberg for his assistance in the preparation of this report.