

# Immediacy of Image – Image of Immediacy

Live Media Art in Japan between Tradition and Hypermodernity. An historical and contemporary View

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## ABSTRACT

In 1970, French philosopher Roland Barthes declared Japan as a model for a kind of system liberated from any (Western) signification-overload, at an important moment in time when art in the West as well as in the East began forming an alliance with technology. The emergence of the new medium video then became symptomatically representative of and a contributor to the changes that occurred. Its inherent function as an ‘electronic mirror’ unfolded, not least through its direct cultural use: it remains a symbol in the West because it is still regarded as subject-loaded and therefore exposed to the reproach of narcissism, whereas the East regards it as a signifier for the emptiness of symbols.

In Japanese linguistic usage the word Art is understood in a wider sense of Life and the World in their multiplex manifestations. This is of course both traditional and ‘*hyper-modern*’, understood as an experiment, an attempt to say something new – just as, in the early days of the *Gutai*-Group, J. Yoshihara ordered to his pupils not to do anything that anybody else would do: an effort to go beyond the commonly accepted boundary of our daily reality, to think and to live in a different way.

## KEYWORDS

*Renga*, Closed Circuit Video, Interaction, Liveness

## *Gutai*

Any survey of Modern Live (Media) Art in Japan should probably begin with an excursus back into the 1950s and with the mentioning of the first artistic group in Japan that reached international significance: The group called *Gutai* was established in 1954 in Osaka and it played a major role in the process of mutual influence between Western and Japanese art in the 1960s & 70s. The name – ‘*Gutai-ha*’ – expressed the Zen Buddhist ideal and an appeal for spontaneity and directness linked to the ability to express feelings and thoughts in an immediate way. [1] The body played a very important role; another major interest of the group was direct contact with the landscape and the spontaneous treatment of natural materials and colours as well as a very significant inclusion of the audience. An often quoted example of a *Gutai*-live performance is a 20 minute *koi* or action by Kazuo Shiraga in 1955 involving ‘*Doru ni idomu*’ (*Mud-Fighting*), where he asked the audience to participate by making mud-sculptures. Another one is Saburo Murakami’s, which he entitled *Kami wo yabureru* (*Paper-Destroying*).

There was obviously a link between such actions and the action-painting methods of Jackson Pollock in the US, who is also rightly regarded as a cultural initiator of the Happening as an art form there, one of the first performative and participative art forms after WW2. The mentioned actions by Shiraga and Murakami took place within the first *Gutai*-exhibition in an enclosed space in October 1955 in Tokyo, one year after the *Gutai*-magazine appeared in English for the first time. In 1958 another *Gutai* exhibition was mounted, but this time at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York and this exhibition was also known as the birth of the American happening. Just one year on, the installations with the monochrome canvasses and shining electric bulbs by Atsuo Tanaka and Michio Yoshihara during the *Gutai*-exhibition in Turin influenced a European group then forming there under the name of *Arte Povera* and which would itself become an influential force in contemporary art. .

Conversely, the direct influence of European abstract painting on the *Gutai*-Group is undisputed, initiated as it was in the visit to Japan of Japanese Painter Norio Imai, together with the major theorist of *L’ Art Informel*,<sup>4</sup> Michel Tapié, and the French painter Georges Mathieu. This visit took place in September 1957, and already during the fourth *Gutai*-exhibition in October of the same year the actionist current was displaced by the pictorial one, obviously influenced by the visit of the French delegation. This new paradigm was later recognized as ‘an immediate fall of the creative potential’ of the Group. [2]

In the 1960s painting was to determine the politics of the group, not least because of its privileging by Jiro

Yoshihara, who was also the financier and a kind of ‘father’ of the *Gutai* Group, until his death in 1972.

At the same time, gradually, Japan became the major international force in the development of electronic technology, especially video with *Sony* and other well known companies. The development of early media art in Japan should be put in this context, between her persisting cultural and artistic tradition and her very fast industrial development.

### *Yamamoto*

A good example is the Japanese Artist Keigo Yamamoto (b. 1936). From 1972 on he constructed his first Live-Video installations (also called Closed Circuit Video installations [3]) *Mimic* and *Copy*, understood also as ‘Video Games’. They were actually designed to make an observer an active participant and they wouldn’t have been possible without the inherent properties of the video medium – of recording and transmitting the audiovisual signals instantaneously. In his technical experiments Yamamoto saw at the same time the possibility of analysing the concept of Interval, *ma*, which is so important in Japanese culture. *Ma* is a key notion in Zen Buddhism and pervades everyday life in Japan. It also becomes manifest in the ideals of ‘aimless’ thinking and meditation, something paralleled again in the Japanese bias in favour of acoustic perception as compared to the greater directness of the visual as we know it from the Cartesian-European point of view. For example, if we imagine two consecutive sentences, the *ma* between them should be understood as a break or emptiness, but as important as the spoken sentences themselves.

Yamamoto added two further traditional Japanese notions, that of *kokyū* (breath) and *ki* (spirit, soul): He interpreted them on a much broader, intercultural and even biological level and stressed in this context the possibilities of their research and experience through the analogue means of the video technology. [4]

Concerning his video installation *Hand* from 1977, which can be regarded as representative of Yamamoto’s work in the 1970s & 80s, he claimed that

“There exists the slightest discrepancy between a certain ‘Simple action’ and the ‘Imitating action’ that cannot be discerned by the naked eye [...] This is visual by the electronic video circuit, with only a second’s delay. These discrepancies express the degree of mental tension of each moment. Another circuit exists, which is the audience. The difference between the original action and its imitation is perceived as ‘MA’ (interval), which is sometimes taken as a humorous and sometimes as a spiritual experience.” [5]

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In 1970, French philosopher Roland Barthes declared Japan as a model for a kind of system liberated from any (Western) signification-overload, at an important moment in time when art in the West as well as in the East began forming an alliance with technology. Although, or especially because, Barthes had already declared both ‘author’ and ‘subject’ dead or moribund, the art of that era happily began to receive new and vital impulses of a technological and intercultural nature.

The emergence of the new medium video then became symptomatically representative of and a contributor to the changes that occurred. Its inherent function as an ‘electronic mirror’ unfolded, not least through its direct cultural use: it remains a symbol in the West because it is still regarded as subject-loaded and therefore exposed to the reproach of narcissism, whereas the East regards it as a signifier for the emptiness of symbols – ‘The spirit of the absolute man is like a mirror,’ says Barthes quoting a Taoist master, ‘He does not hold onto anything but does not reject anything. He consumes, but does not hold.’ [6]

The ability to receive and to give back at the same time, without absorption and without distortion, a Haiku ideal of exposition without comment, and the refusal of any interpretation, can be seen as the paradigm of Zen. The negation of the difference between ‘interior’ (*uchi*) and ‘exterior’ (*soto*), and the overcoming of difference ‘as such’ in immediate or ‘simple’ presence, also becomes highly enjoyable: According to the interpretation of the Buddhist Mikkyō school, the present, the ‘now’, is described as the ‘ultimate pleasure.’

### *Iimura*

Another good and early example may be seen in the artistic work of Takahiko Iimura (b. 1937). His connection to the *Fluxus*

group and especially to the European and New York structuralist film movement lead Imura to undertake intensive artistic research on the processes foundational to meaning construction, as demonstrated in his work on the problem of identity (or the subject-object relationship). [7]

Imura claimed for instance, that the English words *movie*, *motion picture*, or *cinema*, all stress movement; but if we go to Japanese, the word for motion picture is 'eiga', which literally means 'reflected picture': The emphasis here is on the state of reflection rather than on the motion. Also the Chinese word for cinema, in Imura's literal character reading, means 'electric shadow picture', so that he supposed that this idea comes from the shadow theatre. Imura claimed that he himself was also presenting shadow pictures. His Live-Video installations are good examples. Imura's first Live- or Closed Circuit video installation consisted of a feedback-producing arrangement of a video camera and a juxtaposed monitor: the participant (viewer) sits on a chair in front of a monitor with his back to the camera and is given the task of signing a piece of paper, while saying his or her name out loud. The title of the work consists of the noteworthy statement: *Register Yourself: Unless You Register You Are No Person* (1972), which exemplifies an ambivalent critique of the rules governing the media game.

Imura combined a comparable ambivalence between the exposure of the participant to media and the denial of the perception simultaneously promised him with the request, *Project Yourself*, in an installation of the same name from 1973: The person sitting on the chair is asked to talk or perform something for one minute. Other visitors are able to look at the person and the live transmission simultaneously; however, the 'performing' person cannot see him- or herself. As in the installation described above, the transmission can be recorded and played back at some point in the future. Imura presented the structure of picture-viewing, using himself as an object as well as the subject by sitting and facing the screen, having his own audience, and this was particularly suited to the video understood as a reflective medium, for only video has this simultaneous audiovisual response. With his conceptual approach, Imura claimed a special position within the first generation of Japanese artists working with electronic media. Especially when considered in relation to the *Gutai* group's ideals of spontaneity, Imura's art appears to be surprisingly 'Western'. This is ultimately because his art does not conform to the deterministic Western clichés of Japanese artistic thinking. Imura's work in general reflects, in an unsurpassed way, his cultivated transnational 'postmodernity' at the same time that it radiates the traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts of *wabi* (= simplicity, silence) and *sabi* (= unobtrusive elegance).

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One of the key notions in Japanese aesthetics is *Shibui*, – encompassing, amongst others, readings such as: austere, simple, inconspicuous, dark, tasteful, accomplished, demanding. It expresses some of the important art ideals of the Japanese, the so called *Art Path*, itself strongly influenced by the spiritual and practical background of the Zen-Buddhist theory of the *Art Path* (*geido-ron*). *Geido ron* manifests itself in martial arts, Kabuki or the Tea ceremony and in strong contrast to the Western societies it exists outside of the temple, in the middle of secular life. The theory of the *Art Path* is therefore linked both to the concept of *ma* / Interval (as seen and heard by Yamamoto) as well as to the concept of *Play*, which is sometimes even regarded as the major ideal of the *Art-Path*. [8]

Therefore it is also not surprising, when Keiji Nakamura concludes, that

“It can even be said that rather than approaching reality through the medium, Japanese artists were overwhelmed by the reality of the medium itself [...] that's also because there were extremely few attempts to make direct social or political statements in Japanese video art works, compared to those of other countries.” [9]

### ***The Second and the Third Generation***

As in the rest of the world, in the years between 1977 and 1989 media art was not yet a standard feature in exhibitions in Japan. However, the 'breakthrough' happened in the background instead - in the form of culminating theories and new insights into electronic media, which together with the commercial introduction and availability of digital computer systems, networks and interfaces, gradually entered into the awareness of a wider general and art audience, aware. It was at the end of that period, in 1989, that the first worldwide exhibition of Interactive art, *Wonderland of Science - Invitation to Interactive Art* (curator: Itsuo Sakane, b. 1930) was opened in Kanagawa in Japan. It was an event which heralded the international

institutional acceptance of this art form and was followed by artistic hyper-production in the field of electronic media.

The combination of digital computer technology with visual interfaces (video cameras, etc.) resulted in a global 'renaissance' of the Live- or Closed Circuit video installation in the 1990s. Besides D. Rokeby, J. Shaw, M. Krueger and others, one participant was the then twenty-seven-year-old Toshio Iwai. He belongs to a long line of international committed media artists with a strategy that Erkki Huhtamo identified as 'an archaeological approach in media art' [10] that began with the experiments with digital versions of nineteenth-century techniques of visual representation (*Flipbook, Zoetrope, Praxinoscope, Thaumatrope* etc.), and progressed via the Chronophotography of E.-J. Marey and sequential photography of E. Muybridge to the computer supported Live-Video Installation.

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Just as in the rest of the world, and in particular, Europe, Japan in the 1990s saw in the context of media art a revival of the artistic preoccupation with the complex topic of the 'subject-object' relationship. 'Narcissistic' video experiments from the 1960s and 1970s, which utilize media as media of self-reflection, have returned in manifold variations with the beginning of the 1990s. Usually they possess an important 'structural' difference: most Live-Video installations were computer aided, and they took advantage of the extended possibilities for the precise manipulation of the visual imagery (as well as of the sound). Instead of the effects generator, the video mixer and the analogue and digital synthesizer, which earlier stood between the input and output device, the digital computer now became the 'controlling device'. Thus, artistic definition and practices have been extended in many cases by components of programming.

In a culture which has not been shaped historically by the Cartesian separation of body and mind of western society, it would seem as hasty to take the treatment of the 'subject' – 'object' relationship for granted with regard to media art as it would in any other field. However, this complex problem has been a tradition in the work of Japanese filmmakers and media artists for decades, constantly recurring as a topic of interest, and makes reference to cultural distinctions and also to the possibility of transgression. At the same time, the Japanese language has no native term for 'Media Art' (*'me de-i a ahto'*) or 'Interactive Art' (*'intarakutibu ahto'*) and they can not be necessarily subsumed under the traditional notion of Art in the Japanese interpretation. This is because in Japanese linguistic usage the word Art is understood in a wider sense of Life and the World in their multiplex manifestations. This is of course both traditional and '*hyper-modern*', understood as an experiment, an attempt to say something new – just as, in the early days of the *Gutai*-Group, J. Yoshihara ordered to his pupils not to do anything that anybody else would do: an effort to go beyond the commonly accepted boundary of our daily reality, to think and to live in a different way. [12]

### ***Renga & Live-Interaction***

The link made between tradition and 'interaction' can be observed particularly well in numerous media installations and media concepts in which the artist's own computer works are compared, for example, with traditional methods of making art:

A pioneer of Japanese media art, Katsuhiro Yamaguchi (b. 1928), was already writing in 1981 in the context of his project *Imaginarium* about its predecessors, above all about 'the traditional collective art form of Japan, such as '*Renku*' or '*Renga*' meetings, i.e. poets' collective improvisations. Especially '*Renku*' meetings were called at private homes on occasion, where emphasis is placed on live communication.[13] According to the Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō (1644 – 1694), the live atmosphere of the '*Renku*' site is more important than *Haiku*, created from the form of expression of '*Renku*'. He says that, 'when a '*Renku*' meeting is over, sheets of paper as record should be thrown away as rubbish.[14]

The mentioned Keigo Yamamoto referred to the *Renga*-Tradition in describing his own networked and collaborative Live-Media performances or -installations:

'In short, rather than the final piece as a completed work, it is "an art of process" made by a number of pieces and also is an art that reads the "interval" between A and B. In Japan during the Muromachi era (1338–1573), '*Renga*' (linked poem) "a poem read in a game-like way by collaborating" was the trend, where A recites the first half of a poem and B must recite the other half by linking to the first half of it, and

this could be said to have guided network art because it is also an art to read the “interval” between A and B.’[15]

Attracted not least by the ‘interactive’ quality of *Renga*, many Japanese artists have taken up this traditional artistic word game again, also reinterpreting it in their media installations:

Rieko Nakamura and Toshihiro Anzai for example started their project *Renga* in 1992, connecting the original combined verses to combined images in an approach described as ‘a new methodology of image creation in the digital era. It was given birth at the intersection of art, telecommunication network and multimedia.’[16]

A kind of ‘live distribution of authorship’ also formed part of the Live-Video installation and workshop with the title *Moppet Renga* by Tamio Kihara & Hiroko Otsui at the ICC in Tokyo in 1996.

Naoko Tosa also related *Interactive Poem*, her Ph.D.-Computer piece, explicitly to the *Renga* tradition in designating it as ‘*Renga-style*’[17]

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In the 1990s, media art production in Japan achieved its quantitative as well as qualitative high point. The new generation of the Japanese artists influenced the international media art scene considerably. Their continuous presence at exhibitions and festivals all over the world helped Japanese media art not only to take a leading role in the globalized media art field, but also to give us an idea of the rich historical development of modern art in Japan and its processes of reaching mutual understanding with western art and cultures. It therefore only behoves us to underscore its importance in (Media-) Art History as well – that of the west as much as that of the east.

## FOOTNOTES

[1] *gutai-ha* means *Gutai School* or *Group*. The name *gutai* could be also understood as a programmatic allusion, connected to its literal meaning of ‘concrete’, though not understood as ‘real’, but ‘direct’ or ‘spontaneous’, with the skill to convey own thoughts and feelings instantaneously. The second part of the word, *tai*, means ‘body’. See Iseki Mas’aki, ‘Geschichtlicher Hintergrund und Entwicklung der Gutai-Gruppe als eine zentrale Frage’ in *Gutai. Japanische Avantgarde / Japanese Avant-Garde 1954 – 1965*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Barbara Bertozzi and Klaus Wolbert (Darmstadt 1991) pp. 80-81.

[2] Barbara Bertozzi, ‘Am Ursprung der Neuen Avantgarden: die japanische Künstlervereinigung Gutai’ in *Gutai* (as in note 1), 57.

[3] Hundreds of Live-Video installations are documented in Slavko Kacunko, *Closed Circuit Video Installations. A Contribution to the History and Theory of Media Art* (Berlin 2004; available only in German).

[4] See: Keigo Yamamoto, ‘Winds of the Media from Asia: Human Beings and Art in the B-ISDN Era’ in *Ars Electronica. Facing the Future*, ed. Timothy Druckrey with Ars Electronica (Cambridge / London, 1999).

[5] Cf. note 4. – See also Keigo Yamamoto, text extracted from the catalogue issued at the ‘Toward the Museum of Tomorrow ... Live Art Theater’ exhibition at Hyogo Modern Art Museum (Text: 21/3/1981).

[6] Roland Barthes *Empire of Signs*, transl. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang / Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1st US ed. 1982), (quote above translated from the German edn, *Das Reich der Zeichen* (Frankfurt / M.: Suhrkamp, 1981), p. 109. (orig: *L’empire des signes*, Geneva: Skira, 1970).

[7] For the related classification of the Live Media Installations see Slavko Kacunko, *Closed Circuit Video Installations* (see note 3).

[8] See: Hans Belting / L. Haustein, *Das Erbe der Bilder. Kunst und moderne Medien in den Kulturen der Welt* (Munich 1998), in particular the essay by R. Ohashi.

[9] Keiji Nakamura, Introduction in *Private Visions. Japanese Video Art in the 1980s* (Japan Foundation, 1990).

[10] Erkki Huhtamo, 'Time Traveling in the Gallery: An Archeological Approach in Media Art' in Moser / MacLeod (eds.), *Immersed in Technology. Art and virtual Environments* (Cambridge, Ma. / London 1996).

[11] For more information see <http://hct.ece.ubc.ca/research/iamascope/>.

[12] Hiroshi Yoshioka, 'Embedding Media in Culture' in *Interaction 01* (IAMAS, 2001) p.109.

[13] Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, *Imaginarium* (Exhibition catalogue), Tokyo, February 1981, pp. 20-21.

[14] See note 13.

[15] Yamamoto (as note 4), p. 289. – The Japanese verse form of *Renga* dates back at least eight centuries and is articulated, or practised in collaborative fashion in what one might today call 'real time' and in an occasionally jocular feat of punning between several participants joining together verses of three or two lines. The first three lines later evolved into the haiku (Matsuo Bashō), the Japanese verse form best known in the west.

[16] See: <http://www.renga.com/>.

[17] Naoko Tosa, *Research on Interactive Characters that Recognize and Generate Emotions in Cyberspace* (PhD thesis), 1999, p. 4. See also: <http://www.tosa.media.kyoto-u.ac.jp/>.

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