

Curating Digital Media—Next Generation of Japanese Media Art & Exhibition

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Abstract

In 1960s, Japanese Digital Artists were already introduced internationally by their pioneering works. In 2002, Digital/Media Art became the required course of junior-high/high school art classes, and digital art expressions including computer graphics have been in the ascendant to show the broader diversity than ever. Like other Asian countries, government has started supporting the Media Art contents and today's Japanese art students, whose works have been highly evaluated even overseas, to enter a new phase. I would like to report on the current situations of media art education and support system for Media Art in Japan and consider the future of upcoming talents, by examining examples; Japan Media Arts Festival and also quote the experience of many exhibitions on media art for over ten years, at the Images & technology Gallery in Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, which founded as a public institution of image media.

1. Introduction

We must be clear about what we mean, when we think about “vision,” imaging and our ways of perceiving the outside world. Even in Japan, where imaging technologies advanced, many people do not understand about what “imaging” is. By “Imaging” means the creation of images through any medium that is not simply manual: those that can be traced, reflected, photographed, reproduced and projected. The term is not restricted to animation, video, film or other means of creating pictures in motion. “Imaging” encompasses shadow play, magic lantern, anamorphose and all the processes of visualization. Since the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography (TMMP) opened as a center for photography and other visual media, it has been important to discuss what “imaging” means.

Japanese Digital Art has been highly evaluated from its beginning in the 1960s. The members of CTG (Computer Technique Group) who participated in the exhibition entitled *Cybernetic Serendipity* held at ICA,

London in 1968, were students at The University of Tokyo and Tama Art University at the time. They presented their original XY-plotters and performed “happenings” at Tokyo-Garou (Tokyo Art Gallery) where they would later be discovered by a curator Jasia Reichardt while her research in Japan. [Figure 1]



Figure 1.

Jasia Reichardt(Ed.), *Cybernetic Serendipity*, Studio International London, 1968 and Kennedy, ©CTG 1968 (idea:M.Komura/Program:K.Fujino)

As Reichardt said, our generation – people who were younger than five in 1970 – was not surprised about the application of technology to art or vice versa. We are not surprised by the newness of technology itself but rather by the new concept which emerge from it. My generation’s successors are members of the digital generation. By the time they were born, the world was already networked. Mine is a fortunate generation that has been able to study with teachers, curators, researchers and artists who were at the forefront of the new image-making technologies in the 1980s. There was a growing interest in realizing the idea of the *Musee Imaginaire*, which Katsuhiro Yamaguchi, one of the pioneers of media artist, called *Imaginarium*. It was this impetus which let led to the founding of Japan’s first museum of photography and imaging. [Figure 2]



Figure 2-1. Magic Lanterns

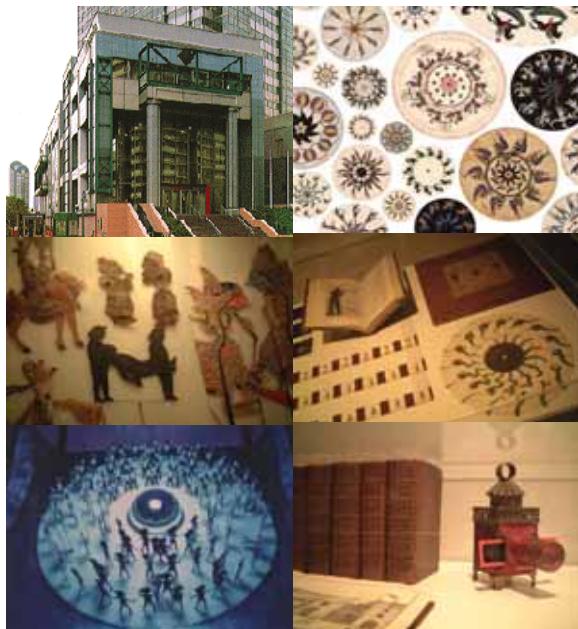


Figure 2-2. TMMP and its permanent collection

The Images and Technology Gallery, the B1 floors of the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, are the results of that initiative. Here, the broad field of image-making is divided into five themes based on its permanent collection from pre-cinema history to contemporary interactive-installations like C.Sommerer & L.Mignonneau's work – themes on Imagination, Animation, 3rd Dimension, Magnified View and Documentation as “time and place remembered”. The following chapters describe about the current situation of media art museum in Japan and how I realized those 5 themes via many media art exhibitions in past 10 years realized these five cyclic themes.

2. The Current Situation in Japan

In 2004, our group—the Media Arts Research Committee started a study on Japanese policies and situations of institutions that are related to media arts. We did a survey for 185 major museums in Japan and analyzed various exhibitions and the international institutions like ZKM, Ars Electronica Center etc. We hope that museums or public facilities can be a center for the creative domain of media arts in the postmodern era. As many artists and researchers think that collaboration between scientists, engineers and artists will be effective, we should seek alternative ways to introduce media arts because these arts involve their environments and interact with audiences in non-traditional ways.

The Agency of Cultural Affairs of the Japan Ministry of Education and Science take initiatives of promoting

media arts through an annual “Japan Media Arts Festival” at TMMP. The Fundamental Law for the Promotion of Culture and Arts in 2001. It defines “Media Arts” as “movies, cartoons, animations and arts that utilizing computers and other electric devices.” From an economic point of view, also the Law for Creation, Protection and Promotion of Applying Contents in 2004 acknowledging the value of intellectual property of popular cultural institutions such as movies, games, music, photography, animation and comics, all major Japanese industries in the international market. From 2002, all Japanese junior-high and high schools launched the new curriculum in which digital media/images are taught as a subject of art lessons. According to our survey, 63 percent of art museums have already exhibited something related in media arts, and 17 percent are interested though they have not yet developed any such exhibitions. About 45 percent major Japanese museums have less than 5 staffs in charge of exhibition and public/educational programs, and merely have specialists of exhibition engineering. Many people have pointed out that the shortage of curatorial staff and budgets is a problem. Some curators/educators regard media arts as hard to handle and cost-consuming. [Figure 3]

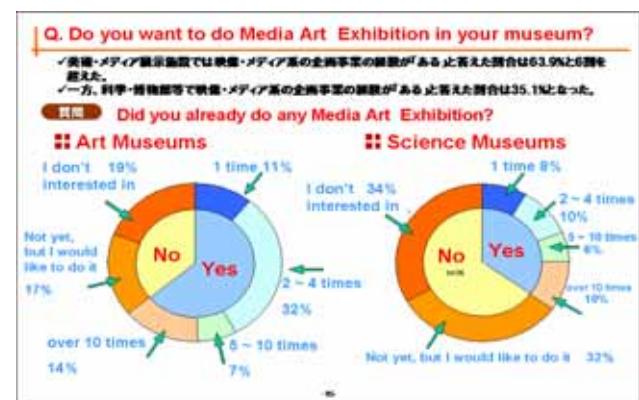


Figure 3. Graph from the survey

Through this research, we realized that we should develop and share how to exhibit or organize them on common hardware platforms. Then, exhibiting media arts would be more economical and easy to handle by few numbers of staff.

2.1. Various examples and analysis in TMMP

Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography has gained more visitors since it began having many media arts exhibitions. Here I describe some examples and suggestions as new systems by which we can carry out media art exhibition more easily. There are five cyclic thematic exhibitions. Larger scale of visual image history and the contemporary works crossed equally in “Re-

Imagination –image/media/museum” in 2002-2003, which round to the six public museums in Japan. Usually, contemporary installations like Kazuhiko Hachiya's multi-viewpoint experimental system *Centrifuge* and other historical visual devices like magic lanterns or peepshows are exhibited separately, but in this show, those were introduced at the same time.

In the exhibition “A Universe on Storyboards: Birth of an Image” in 2003, the “intersection” between workshop and exhibition was also introduced. In this exhibition, I displayed storyboards, puppet models and character sketches as the backgrounds of music videos, animations, computer games and commercial movies by 9 artists including Koji Yamamura and his work “Mount Head.” “Digital Forest” exhibition featuring Tamas Waliczky and other digital image artists considered healing and curing in our digital age. A kind of contrastive feeling of healing/digital age was crossing there. In the “Mission: Frontier–deep space of our perception” exhibition, it focused on expressing the frontier which unites art and science. A new frontier was born from two different fields of art and science. We exhibited lots of works related new, beautiful technology in space, like Takuro Osaka's visualization of cosmic-ray from outer space, or the deep sea and the inner space of our body. [Figure 4]



Figure 4. Brochure, *Mission: Frontier* and *Meta-Visual*

I tried to exceed a kind of hyper visual space in a certain form, which appears in “Meta Visual –the history

and futurescapes of our perception.” Strange feelings and splendid expressions of depth, like illusion appeared in Kohei Nawa's spatial installations were introduced. Since this exhibition toured to France, I had to make it very compact and handy. To France, I carried lots of works by Maywadenki, Yoichiro Kawaguchi etc as flip books in iPod photo, or Toshio Iwai's *Electroplankton* as game toys, in NintendoDS. This exhibition enabled us to enjoy both, huge installations/small designed product, at the same time as a mixture in the spatial intersection.

I had been in charge of these 5-6 exhibitions in a year. Thus, the systematization of the media art exhibition touring in many places turned out to be necessary. If many people need media art exhibition, we have to make its realization more easily. Then, I got an idea of applying genetic algorithm method as the technique of composing a media art exhibition, by the art and engineering field. In this system, which generates space arrangement automatically, the characteristic elements are inputted as a character in which they adjusted each other more effectively.

The work group as an individual which had restrictive conditions on the drawing with which the exhibition room was restricted is arranged, and those installations have their conditions, such as lighting, sound, motion and operation, considered and are generated automatically. The analysis of my past exhibition plan is already advanced, and a “Meta Visual” exhibition is due to perform systematically exhibition plan constructed by the manual technique, and it is possible to share it from now on. Usually, the evaluation of the exhibition activities organized by local government such as Tokyo city, is not based on any criticism etc., but judged only by the number of visitors. Even if everyone understands that is a problem, the method by which we can rely is not generalized yet. But we can see how the media art can reduce a cost and increase a number of visitors, from 170,000 to 430,000 people in a year, after we invite The Media Arts Festival Japan in 2001.

From now on, evaluation of easy usage and universal quality will be performed by use of some kind of network technology, such as ID tag card. By proving the high quality in the media art field, its outstanding cost performance, and wonderful works, the characteristic elements of this field is understood still more widely, evaluated, and could reach much more height. A large amount of budget is applied for the research of science or engineering field which using the edged technology needs to be introduced to us in more intelligible, scalable and easy style. Making them familiar via digital art/media art exhibition is the mission which this area has, and there we can find a new aspect in the new century.

2.2. Contests and Educational Program in Japan

Today, the students from elementary school to high school study animation, photography, comics and various digital expressions in their fine art classes. This recent change in curriculum perplexed many teachers who were not familiar with those expressions and drove them to call my museum for help. They would ask what to do with lack of the personal computers and we would introduce visual devices and animation toys like Magic Roll, Phenakistiscope, and Peepshow to ease them, explaining it is not only about computers. They would also bring their classes to the museum each semester. Apart from theoretical lectures and technical workshops, we regularly hold workshops as “school programs” where students can actually learn how to make optical toys and animation devices. Unlike many countries, this cooperation between educational institutes and cultural facilities in media education has just started in Japan. This certainly is a great progress. However, we still have a way to go: With only few exceptions, “artist” as profession cannot make good in Japan. The social conditions for the artists are totally different from the artists in the countries where they can concentrate on their creative works. We must establish a system to support and promote the artists, who will emerge as a consequence of the educational reform, by providing the places to show their works, and by making functional business model.

In the “GLOBAL MEDIA” annual series exhibition, triumphal return introduction of the activity of the Japanese artists who plays an active part in the international festival like SIGGRAPH or Ars Electronica etc. was carried out. Especially, in 2005 exhibition, while introducing exhibition of three Japanese young students groups awarded in the “next idea” section of Ars Electronica, the installation of *Death Clock* by Tatsuo Miyajima & Hajime Tachibana which enables to dive into cyber network world was shown by using beautifully designed RFID tag card. This work made a cyber/real space across, and introduced the trial bringing a kind of ubiquitous method into the exhibition space.

Also “OTAKU: persona=space=city” exhibition was a triumphal return show of the architectural biennial in Venetia. The curious interest of people who want to know about unknown field of OTAKU=Nard culture increased. And huge numbers of visitors were waiting to enter this show for 2 hours, and also we had over 9000 persons per day in total with the visitors to The Media Arts Festival, Japan. It was the moment of encounter of visual arts and Otaku culture, as a remixed, hybrid culture field which was newly recognized. [Figure 5]



Figure 5.
SinkTop*, honorary mentioned in Ars Electronica 2004 and *GLOBAL MEDIA2005/OTAKU

All three awards of “the next idea,” a newcomer section established in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of Ars Electronica Festival, went to Japanese students (*SinkTop* by the post-graduate school of Waseda University, *MOONY* by IAMAS and *Visual Resonator* by The University of Tokyo,) and this exhibition was their triumphal return. In addition to introducing new artists, this exhibition has illustrated the current situation of Japan from outside. Though, in Japan, even in the educational field, things that have been valued overseas and re-imported are easily accepted and considered important, what we tried to accomplish there was not re-import. We presented the situation itself where the new value, ideas and aesthetics that were born in Japan are directly and strongly exported to overseas. It is a pattern of “homecoming exhibition” of young generations’ activity in abroad.

It is important to mention “Digital Stadium” on NHK BS1, which is an internationally rare example of a TV program supporting young artists. In the program, the jury members consisted of media artist, CG artists and other experts, including Toshio Iwai, Kazuhiko Hachiya and Maywadenki, review the digital art works from all over the country and the award-winning works will be shown in “DAF Tokyo exhibition.” Each week, they invite artists like Golan Levin from abroad to give performances in the studio letting the young viewers learn the actualities of the art scene. This exhibition has improved the brand-image of digital/media art, and brought business opportunities to some of the artists. In consequence of the exhibition, they started working for TV programs, making opening animation or motion graphics.

“Promotion of media arts” is stated in the Basic Law on Culture and Art Promotion (BUNKA GEIJUTU SHINKO KIHON HOU), and several years prior to its enactment in 2001, the Agency for Cultural Affairs started

to hold the Media Arts Festival, Japan. Since 2001, the festival has been held in Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, and will celebrate the 10th anniversary in 2006 fiscal year. The CG Contest for Students organized by CG-ARTS Association has even longer history. This competition is held annually to explore the young talent among the students, and provide them with the place for exhibition. Jury members evaluate the applied works in art, design, entertainment and industrial fields based on how new expressions are sought logically, technically, aesthetically and creatively.

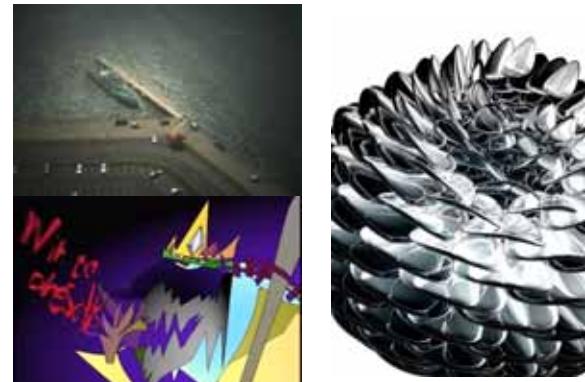
In 2005, professors from universities with media-related faculties, researchers, artists and a curator were among the jury members to select the 25 works out of 1379 applicants. A best award, two awards for excellent works, and five honorable mentions go to each of the three sections of the competition (interactive/still image/animation,) and from all the applicants, U-18 award for one student under the age of 18 are selected. Some of the artists, who were awarded in the past, now take active part internationally. Recently, there appeared some students who won both awards in the main part of Media Arts Festival and in this contest at the same time.

Works in the 2005 fiscal year (exhibited in the Media Art Festival in February, 2006) show radical traits that would renew the impression of the Japanese media art, on top their tremendous improvements in techniques employed in their creation. As to the awarded pieces, there was no premature awkwardness that we would expect from creations youth.

In the animation section, in addition to some Koji Yamamura like all-Japanese animation, there was a strange CG animation entitled *OH HISSE* by Akira Yamakawa and Kojiro Shishido, which shows the acrobatic movements of children in a comical mass game. Another work by Kozo Takano, *City obscura*, portrays actual landscapes in a rather fantastic way to give them Diorama like unreal impression, using a historical drawing/skating equipment Camera Obscura. Takeo Tsushima's *Allegory of Media Art* analyzes Vermeer's masterpiece spatially, using the stereoscopic principle. A visitor can enter the stereographic space of Vermeer's painting with an interface that he manipulates with hands. Among the award winners is Shunsaku Hayashi, often compared with Kento Suto, who was previously awarded for his still images with overwhelming intensity. They both were in elementary schools when their names first appeared on the award winners' list. Awarded in 2004 for his digital illustration with vivid lines, Hayashi turned to the moving image this year and produced a notable animation *BLACK FOG*. [Figure 6]



Figure 6. 1) A.Yamakawa & K. Shishido, *OH HISSE* and T.Tsushima, *Allegory of Media Art* (Right, below)



2) K. Takano, *City obscura*(Left above), S. Hayashi, *BLACK FOG* (U-18) and M. Nishimura *Plants* (Right)

There are more competitions and exhibitions in addition to the ones I have mentioned above: "IVRC - Student VR Contest" is a technology-based contest. "The Imaginative of Information Art" is intercollegiate media art exhibition. And "DiVA exhibition" by Art-Science Association focuses on both science and art.

Engineering system technology course in The University of Tokyo (Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies) attempts to make use of art work expression as a way of publishing the result of their research. "Gakkan works exhibition" is the outcome of what the students study during their course.

3. Conclusion

As mentioned before, the investigation based on my exhibition activities showed that a social need in the media art field is great and strong. Although large numbers of cultural facilities are willing to have media art activities, usually the shortage of know-how and equipment is difficult. The institutions or museums which have performed pioneering activity must share the know-how which they have. Also we must be conscious about the prosperity of the present digital contents field having a source in the avant-garde art activities and expressions in the early 60s. What is the next stage of media art? There are three possible elements to this, 1) Making products as a multiple artwork, 2) Creating educational materials, 3) Public art. Thus I want to propose new cultural facilities, something like Malraux suggested in the past, as an ideal circumstances for media arts. One approach to this task is, establish a kind of exhibition-support system using a genetic algorithm that materializes both adjacent works effectively. We put each artwork's element like lighting, movements, interaction etc as CONDITIONS, and also put special conditions of the exhibition room as CONSTRUCTION. And after the tentative DECISION, the trial is repeated as RE-CONSIDERING, REPLACEMENT and SHUFFLE like GA theory. [Figure 7]

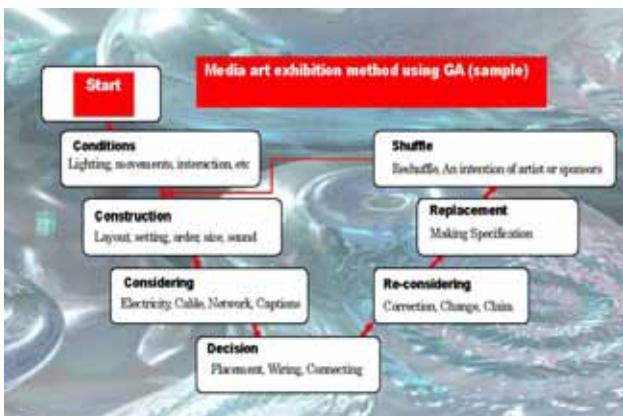


Figure 7. Exhibition Model using GA

Moreover, the system which feeds back the opinion of visitors is required so that an exhibition may not be appreciated only by the number of visitors. IT technology rather than the classical questionnaire in paper is effective, to evaluate the quality as a trial, and to feed back to subsequent enterprises. In the "Meta-Visual" exhibition, in 2005, the new questionnaire system for counting a total numbers of the opinions automatically, using the wireless pen tool by NTT COMWARE CORPORATION.

If the place of media art exhibitions increase in number, a more interesting work and the new talent can be seen, and we can turn and continue the trial of our perception which we have continued from B.C. to the future. Today's world is one of shared cultural aspirations and shared images. Imaging is at its center.

Meanwhile, as I suggested earlier, we should come to terms with the simple truth that, just as we must look to our past, so our future too will have its roots in the present.

Like many of the Asian countries, government's support for media art and the activities for "Promotion of media art contents" have started in Japan. Student works have been highly evaluated even overseas. In the spring of 2005, over 160 Japanese four-year collages and universities had courses or lectures of digital/media art studies. The number is still increasing, and it will be over 200. And if we are to include other schools and academic institutes, the number would be far more. That is to say countless students graduate from these educational facilities each year. There are over 60 digital/media art related events held every year. And the number of major digital/media art organizations in Japan is over 80.

Where would the new talents for the next digital expressions be found? Media art will not be confined in the cybernetic space and computer screens, but it will certainly spread its stage to other fields, including product design, interior design, educational materials, public art and media performance, employing old and new concepts that would verify its significance. Yoichiro Kawaguchi's *Gemini* with traditional Japanese dance and Toshio Iwai's *Sho of Light ~the sound of the sho returned as light~* with Mayumi Miyata, a renowned sho player, were among the attempts of juxtapose digital images with real-time performances. Not only the traditions have universal values, but there are new values that would attract media artists and people in the world as well. As the conventional values unique to Japan such as "WABI" and "SABI" have been brought abroad, the concept "MOE, cherish affection," which was recently established in the Akihabara's OTAKU culture, is becoming familiar notion in France and other countries.

Also, new artists are making their own fields where they can give birth to the new expressions, by interconnecting digital domain to the domains once considered to be irrelevant (literature, medical science, and body reconstruction.) To support the digital/media art education, we must not limit its area by preconceived ideas. It is important to create the social links between the museums and the other specialized institutions, and give the students opportunities to experience these emerging subfields on educational purposes. And it is the educators who play essential roles in creating this alternative digital/media art space.

For the last several years, the Japanese government has subsidized researches in science and technology with the projects such as “CREST” for group researchers, and “SAKIGAKE, a forerunner” for individual researchers. Exhibition in workshops and museums where people from children to adults can attend is an effective way to share the results of these cutting-edge researches.

As mentioned above, in the CG Contest for Students, there are several young artists who pay homage to the past pre-cinema history of image media. Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography has invited contemporary artists to give workshops in which the participants make image devices originated before 19th century. A unique educational kit co-produced by ELEKIT/EK Japan Ltd. and TMMP to make motorized Phenakistiscope, Heliocinegraph and Zoetrope was developed for the exhibition “Meta-Visual” in 2005, and it is planned to be for sale internationally by latter half of 2006. [Figure 8]



Figure 8. Meta-Visual Workshop and *La Nature*, 1882

If the policy for supporting the development of such tools and kits is established, the students and the pupils who study digital/media art as a compulsory can be more easily become familiar with the concept of the image media. It is not that all the children who receive media art education will be media artists. It is for the students other than those who wish to be artists as well. The reinforcement of the media art education will mean a lot, especially in a country like Japan where those in the administration lack the know-how on the field. Until now, we could not do much more than just pointing out the importance of media literacy and our media education has just started. In this paper, I have mainly explained the situation around Japanese new generation. But certainly, new generation's footsteps are approaching to our digital art world.

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