

Art & technology in Japan

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Our invitation to teach in Japan arrived in the same month as an 'eviction notice' telling us we would have to quit our 'Space' studio in London.

The date to leave the studio was set two weeks before the start of the Japanese academic year on April 1. Fate was trying to tell us something. We had recently been in Japan exhibiting in ARTEC, the first exhibition in a new international biennale of technological art which took place in Nagoya, in the summer of 1989. Compared to the miserly Dickensian way the curator at the Tate Gallery Liverpool had argued over our expenses in driving our own work (for five hours) from London to Liverpool in January of that year we had found the lavish hospitality offered by the sponsoring company a more civilised way for the artist to have to face the pains of exhibiting. We went back to Japan.

We were jointly invited to Tsukuba University, a State University in Tsukuba Science City, a town built in the 1970s amongst paddy fields and forest to house private and government research agencies. We were invited to teach holography, a medium we have been working with for over ten years, and one that Tsukuba University's Art School had been teaching for over 12 years. Led by Katsuhiro Yamaguchi (b.1928), the video artist well known for his design of a pavilion at the Osaka Expo in 1970 and for his continual involvement with art and technology, the course, the first of its kind in Japan, covers new media and the sciences that underpin the technologies as a fine art form. This course exists alongside one that covers more traditional arts: nihonga painting and calligraphy.

Unlike most art teaching we have seen elsewhere, teaching here is not studio based and the students have no space of their own to work in. The studio as a place where critique takes place does not exist. Students are taught in a classroom, and for practical skills in the workshops. The art teachers here do have space for their own 'research' a separate Institute of Art and Design. Few practising artists we meet, including those fellow Japanese exhibitors at ARTEC, have what we might call studios. Redundant industrial spaces and warehouses do not (yet) exist in Japan, neither do artist-run organisations providing space. Artists have, if they are lucky, tiny offices, with slides and catalogues the only proof of existing work. In this sense the new technologies offer younger artists new spaces -- especially through the use of



Music insects, 1990 Toshio Iwai, Interactive computer artwork by former graduate of Tsukuba University.

video and computers. Additional skills, for example in electronics and construction, can be bought in from the many small companies and agencies that provide such services all over Japan. Many exhibiting Japanese artists are quite open about having their work produced for them, including two artists working in new media who will represent Japan at this year's Expo in Seville, Spain: Setsuko Ishii holography and Tatsuo Miyajima, whose work uses electronic displays. Works produced in these media are perhaps liberated from the necessity of a traditional studio. The lack of available studio space certainly fuels the demand for the services of the rental galleries, as artists often rent these spaces to show or demonstrate their work for the first time to a largely private audience, thereby taking on that part of a studio's

function. We have often seen the same piece of work progress through a variety of Tokyo exhibitions in the course of a year, making its way through the increasingly public hierarchy of exhibition venues, starting from a rental gallery.

To paint in the Western style as opposed to the traditional nihonga form (an art form that is rarely seen outside Japan) is already a reaction against conservatism. Using new technologies as an art form does not seem to be thought of as strange in Japan. Technological things proliferate here, including decorative video displays, hologram toilet signs in trendy Tokyo department stores and holographic telephone cards - the best displaying images of temples. The latest Toyota boasts a holographic head-up display, where dashboard information is displayed floating beyond the glass windscreen by reflecting it in a plastic hologram of a lens laminated to the glass. However, the Japanese do not have any special reverence for technology, they have a 'pile them high and sell them cheap' philosophy which they apply to even the latest appliances, which soon become commonplace.

Our way of working in holography has been to maintain our own studio and develop skills which we could call our own. As a crude generalisation it seems that our Japanese students would be happy if they had a fixed machine to work with, whereas we like to maintain some semblance of the flexible practices of craft or individual skills. Our satisfaction comes from a total involvement with the production process. We make our own equipment, for example, so that our working practice differs from the scientist's application of the same media, or even that of commercial studios. We also find the tensions between old and new - of things, media and thought - an evolving theme in our work. Prior to coming to Japan we were the Artists-in-Residence at The Royal Greenwich Observatory, UK, from 1987-88. Working in this historical environment confirmed our understanding that much of our practice in making holograms is an old craft, that of optics, where you must know the workings of mirrors and lenses. The not-so-new technology vital to providing the three-dimensional image - that is the laser, invented in 1965 - co-exists alongside older practices. Holography is in principle a photographic recording. Our

Japanese art students take a course in 'optics for artists' as a preliminary to video or holography.

Working here at Tsukuba, we started to document the books in the library, drawn by the comforting familiarity of the English volumes as well as the exotic novelty of the Japanese texts alongside. We now have over 80 holograms of book spines to be installed with computer drawing produced in black and white from a personal laser printer. We find ourselves stuck without a studio and unable to see our work as it progresses, and our installation ambitions are larger than the average rental gallery space. We feel like manufacturers working on the components for later assembly, and we remember being warned by Ko Nakajima, a video artist exhibiting next to us in the ARTEC exhibition, that Japan was 'a factory country, factory culture, very good place for making work but exhibit outside our country'.

Here the Japanese seem to pursue art and technology as a convention in itself, identifying the area of practice by its technical means and then pursuing it in a pragmatic way. We were instructed not to teach first or second year undergraduate students ideas, as these were taught in the third year. This is so completely different to Western fine art teaching where concept and idea are paramount to expression, and are often considered a prerequisite to execution. For us every simple image has the potential to be read or be open to interpretation. For the Japanese the artistic element seems to be allowed to evolve in a mysterious way. The focus is on technique and discipline; in the same way a Japanese calligrapher masters his technique, and the 'expression' comes from within the person as if moving through body and brush. This philosophy, it seems does not vary and can be applied equally to any media, including the new technologies. This gives rise to many artworks that we would find decorative, and works to which the question of meaning or content cannot, and perhaps should not, be applied.

Moreover, the lack of critique could be seen as a positive freedom for the artist experimenting with the new. I have often heard Japanese artists complain that there are no critics in Japan, but there does not seem to be a demand for critical analysis from the grassroots up, as it were. Artists working with new media in the West frequently face the 'but is it art?'

question. Teaching at Goldsmith's College, London, in the early 1980s we constantly faced a reaction against teaching holography to undergraduate art students because it was not already proved to be an artform - therefore how could the students' work be assessed?

At that time the university arts courses in Britain faced government cuts, accused of not preparing students for industry. Ironically, fine art students leaving Tsukuba University are snapped up by companies with research divisions in new visual imaging and by the many new museums opening here. Shunsuke Mitamura, the holographic artist and writer who teaches holography on the fine art course at Tsukuba, and a co-founder of the course, expressed his frustration at teaching art in Japan, the problem being that 'there are just too many jobs': during the 'job hunting season', when graduating students take time off college to attend the rounds of interviews, it seems the talented young Japanese artist may simply disappear into the Japanese corporation, lured by the new car and the free company housing.

Susan Gamble works with Michael Wenyon, as 'Wenyon & Gamble', producing holographic installations. They recently (November 1991) exhibited their work at The Whitney Museum of American Art, the first time this museum exhibited holography. Currently they teach at Tsukuba University, Japan.