

Next Generation of digital art – current situation and student works in Japan

Tomoe Moriyama

Curator, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography
Project Associate Professor, The University of Tokyo

1 Introduction

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. Specialized in designing, 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.

In the 1970s, Yoichiro Kawaguchi, Omura Koichi and other young members gathered under Eiichi Izuhara at Osaka University to engage in the leading activities, bringing on the present prosperity of this field. In the 1980s, University of Tsukuba, and other universities included digital art/media art in their curricula. The outcome was not limited to digital images and animations and there were spatial installations, of which most notable examples were by media installation OPTICA. Toshio Iwai was among the artists who started their professional carrier when they were still students. They belong to the first students who studied FORTRAN and BASIC and other programming languages as compulsory subjects in the 1980s. When they started to teach in the 90s, their students in art course were not required to study those programming languages any more. On contrary, due to the spread of personal computers, art students now study the skills to use applications software.

Now that Media Art has been taken into junior-high and high school art classes, expressions of digital art, including computer graphics, are in the ascendant to show the broader diversity than ever. Japanese art works once were often evaluated and attracted people by their introspective character symbolized by “ZEN,” “WABI” and “SABI.” However, those conventional criteria seem invalid when considering the global attention to some of the works by contemporary Japanese media/digital artists.

And if the education is responsible for this shift, to what extent the Media Art education in the compulsory course will affect the future of the Japanese art? In the following chapter, I would like to report on the situations of education and support system for Media Art in Japan and consider the future of upcoming talents.

2 Exhibitions and contests, present situation 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. Under such harsh circumstances, we had several events in the recent years, that brought some fruitful outcomes.

The works exhibited in “n_ext: New Generation of Media Artists,” an exhibition at NTT InterCommunication Center (ICC), have been selected by five media art curators, Kazunao Abe, Yukiko Shikata, Kento Shimizu, Minoru Hatanaka, and Tomoe Moriyama, from public and private art museums such as ICC, Canon Artlab, Sendai Mediateque and Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. *Water Canvas* by Taro Suzuki uses water as display screen and bubbles as its pixels. *streetscape* by Iori Nakai vivifies the memories of places by the sound rolling forth when the tablet pen tool touches the relief map. Norihisa Hashimoto exhibited two series of works with 360 degree-panoramic digital images. *Panorama Ball* displays the image printed on a sphere, while *Zerograph*, is a series with the images printed on a round-shaped panels. Besides those three, twelve young artists participated. With highly conceptual background and beautiful display/book design, it was one of the most successful attempts to provide the young artists with the opportunities for professional careers, who are under the influence of the established artists in the 90s. [Fig1.]



Figure1: 1):n_ext exhibition and Taro Suzuki, *Water Canvas* 2003



2) Norihisa Hashimoto, Zerograph, *Panorama Ball*

“GLOBAL MEDIA” was held by Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in accordance with the media Art Festival of the Agency for Cultural Affairs. We introduced the Japan Pavilion of the Venice Architecture Biennale, the prizewinning works in Prix Ars Electronica and SIGGRAPH. 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.

3000 visitors came to see the special section of “OTAKU,” the same return exhibition of Venice Architecture Biennale, queuing up to 2 hours. 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. [Fig2.]



Figure 2: 1) *SinkTop*, honorary mentioned in Ars Electronica 2004



2) “GLOBAL MEDIA”

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 evaluates the applied works in art, design, entertainment and industrial fields based on how new expressions are sought logically, technically, aesthetically and creatively. [Fig3.]



Figure 3: Kei Oyama, *Shinsatsu-shitsu*, from CG Contest for Students

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 both nationally and 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*. [Fig4.]



Figure 4: 1) Akira Yamakawa, Kojiro Shishido(music), *OH HISSE* and Takeo Tsushima, *Allegory of Media Art*

2) Kozo Takano, *City obscura*(Left above), shunsaku Hayashi, *BLACK FOG* (U-18, Left Below) and Masashi Nishimura *Plants*

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

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 colleges 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 *Gemtion* 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. [Fig5.]

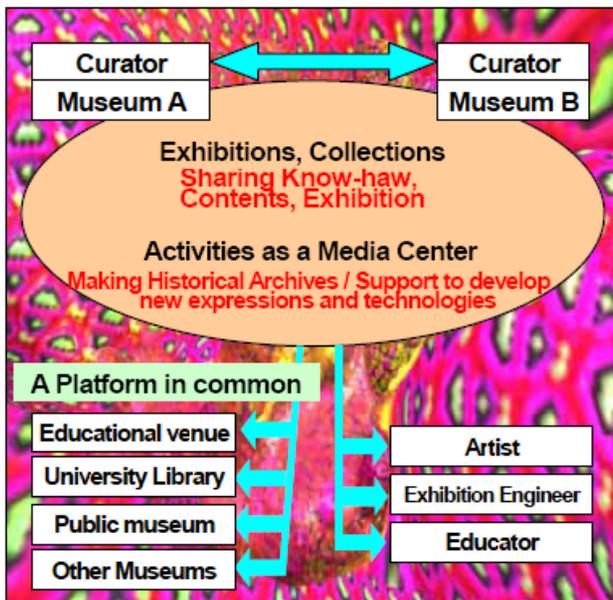


Figure 5: Educator and Museum

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. Moreover, out of the above-mentioned new generation artists, there are quite a few who are engaged in these researches.

Recently, the city of Yokohama started inviting universities and NPOs and eagerly activating the young through exhibitions and workshops, notably an exhibition and workshops entitled Electrical Fantasia in Bank Art Studio NYK Gallery, on Feb., 2006. 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. [Fig6.]



Figure 6: 1) Meta-Visual Educational Kit in TMMP, Zoetrope by E-J. Marey, *La Nature*, 1888 and Thaumatrope, *La Nature*, 1882



2) *Meta-Visual Workshop and Phenakistiscope, 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. Certainly, new generation's footsteps are approaching to our digital art world.

References

- 1 Media Arts Research Committee, Computer Graphic Arts Society 2005, *The proposals for administrative policies to enhance cultural values of research on the cutting edge science technologies as forms of media arts*, Computer Graphic Arts Society, Tokyo
- 2 Hatanaka, T & Moriyama, T 2005, *Where Art and Technology Meet – Media Arts in Museum Exhibitions and Workshops*, Proceedings of International Symposium on Empirical Aesthetics: Culture, Arts, and Education, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan
- 3 Moriyama, T 2004, <Down the long, Dark Road Ahead – to n_ext: New Generation of Media Artists>, *n_ext: New Generation of Media Artists*, pp.28-30, NTT InterCommunication Center [ICC], NTT Publishers, Tokyo
- 4 Moriyama, T 2005, *Meta Visual: 10e Anniversaire du Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography*, FILIGRANES Editions, Paris