

ETC



New Windows on Japanese Art

Command N, The Sukima projects, Artlink Festival, Tokyo.
October 9-24, 1999

DX Raiden

Number 48, December 1999, January–February 2000

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35521ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Raiden, D. (1999). Review of [New Windows on Japanese Art / *Command N*, The Sukima projects, Artlink Festival, Tokyo. October 9-24, 1999]. *ETC*, (48), 65–67.

ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

TOKYO

NEW WINDOWS ON JAPANESE ART

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When we think of the Japanese art scene, we think of high tech work such as Tatsuo Miyajama's digit (all) installations, Seiko Mikami's bio data chairs, Dumb Type and Kenji Yanobe's survival system pieces. A selective survey of works, some of which are fantastic (literally) some which are not.

To name check these artists is to focus on the Japanese contemporary art scene with cross hair like definition. A definitive cultural targeting given latitude by magazines, galleries and festivals. Grants, commissions, and Awards being the cross references that inscribe the marks of longitude and long careers. In other words, it takes a bunch of cash to produce works that fit into the stereotypical mandala of contemporary Japanese art. All the work cited above utilise high-end technologies either in the production process or in the performative process. This in itself is no big deal, look at the costs of presenting the technology based festivals in Germany (Viper), Holland (DEAF), Canada (FCMM), USA (Digital Salon), Austria (Ars Electronica) or Australia (MAAP). The genre of new media based art requires costly equipment and this in turn requires sponsorship and backing from the corporate sector (include the educational establishment as part of the corporate sector).

Techart (as I shall refer to it for this article – meaning art using digital equipment in its exhibition period) renders its difference in Japan because of its cultural location. In Japan bleeding edge technology based art not only projects a cultural trajectory, but also backs up its signification system in the wider context of the present artscene. This means that whilst it offers the remixed idea of future, it also acts as the mainstream signifier of contemporary art practice in modern Japan. Backing up the signification system here involves two processes. One from stereotypical occidental orientation of Japanese culture as wholly bound up in software and another from Japan itself which complicitly engages in and reconstructs this hardwiring identity. The latter acting as the cognitive processor in this complex relationship.

In any other country where Techart is a governmentally supported genre, it is still a relatively sidelined genre with regard to its gallery, museum and magazine visibility in relation to other art forms. It seems that the GPS (Genre Positioning Systems) used by the Japanese via the USA is not only contented with, but is also instrumental in contesting the western peripheral placement of Techart. Thus in Canada, USA, UK, Europe and Australia galleries one still rarely views works that utilise comput-



Hiroko Ichihara, 10 Seconds X 3.

ers. This is a very basic categorisation, but it's a useful one, insofar as it provides us with an insight into the operating manual of a majority of artist run and commercial galleries. Most galleries do not have the funds to provide rented digital equipment and backup (and artists certainly do not want their own systems used for exhibition purposes). There is also the fact that computer based works break down – quite often. Even with expert back up. Not that this is a good reason not to show it. The supposed vulnerability and ambiguity of function purported by much modernist and post modernist art under the rubric of the human condition has never been better exposed.

There is also the problem of potential sale of the



Device Girls, Light/Tone/Motion.

product, or more accurately the lack of publicly recognized product. Instead in Japan as in other cultures, sales or exchanges are made at the time of process, when the work is being produced. Hence, cultural developers ideas and talents are channelled by corporations who often have a hand (or fist) in supporting the project. (Look at Knowbotic Research I/O Dencies project developed at Canon Artlab in Tokyo or Melbourne based production unit – I Cube – and their intellectual property rights of ideas realised at their establishment).

There are however a small number of artist run galleries in Japan, mostly in Tokyo working with new technology in innovative ways. One of these galleries is called Command N.

Curated and operated by a team of four including the nationally recognized artist Masato Nakamura, it is a small space in between Ueno and Akihabara. The size of the actual gallery space does not speak of the impact the gallery has in the surrounding area. Especially in the area or town called Akihabara otherwise known as the Electric City. Their curatorial remit encompasses digitally based work but more importantly to my mind support for off site projects. Activities which posit themselves into discourses surrounding aesthetics, function and the socio-political effects of digital technologies upon the concreteness of the city. This done without necessarily using cutting edge or even recognisably fashionable Lo Tech equipment to make comment.

One such activity currently under development is called the Sukima project whereby Command N are commissioning artists from Japan, UK, Austria and Vietnam to produce art/architectural works for the gaps that exist between buildings in Tokyo. Given Tokyo's strategies to defy earthquake damage it means that a majority of buildings are autonomous structures – producing thousands of small gaps or Sukima in the city. These spaces separate the concrete skins of the urban fold, providing perfect locations in which to question the technologies and social engineering of Architecture and Urban Planning. From projects aiming to squeeze large inflatables between the walls to mock doors and soundscapes, a number of site specific works will be installed around Tokyo. There is an obvious agenda here to question and surprise quietly in the spatial by-products of Tokyo's architecture. There is also the desire to ridicule (there has always been room in the ridicule for structured critique, i.e. Guy Debord's nomadic strategies for metropolitan unrest) without resorting to the ridiculous. Initial plans, drawings and ideas by the prospective artists and architects will be aired by Command N at a presentation for the project at the Artlink Festival – which encompasses buildings in the Ueno and Yanaka areas – from October 9th – October 24th. This mini Festival brings a number of artist run galleries (including The Contemporary Art Factory, Command N and SCAI - The Bathhouse) and museums together on a trail of off site interventions and gallery based works. The Sukima projects will be installed at the next Artlink Festival in 2000.

Whilst Sukima is still in its developmental stage,



Alasdair Duncan, the new futur.



Didier Courbot, *Bad Trip*, 1998.

Command N's initial major curated off site project was staged in Akihabara in 1998 and was called Akihabara TV. Before any explanation of what the project involved, a few words to try and convey the context, the visual and sonic disorientation of living in television town. As mentioned above this area or town is also called Electric City and for good reason. It is no hyperbole to say that it is the worlds most famous consumer-electric retailing area with neighbouring six floor outlets rammed with the latest, most desired and most useless (also read beguiling) gadgets. There are numerous streets of these stores with only the odd Ramen noodle shop separating them. They make advances and approaches to the buying public via hordes of leaflet toting females, but more memorably by scratch edit adverts on the mountainous banks of TV screens and huge monitors Tokyo is renowned for. Nam Jun Paik's work is not only referenced here but monumentalised in a way that must amuse and repel at the same time. An essential recipe for any enduring spectacle, especially one in which you can be the star of. The in-store video camera, capturing the captivated shopper and projecting their image onto three hundred TV screens. Reflecting and embracing the signalled processing of the individual. The hunger for recognition in the collective nipple of the boob toob.

The desire to be surrounded by screened unreality has never found a better home than Akihabara and for that reason alone it became the only location to scout for hosts to air the video event. To do this the Command N team visited about a hundred stores in the attempt to verbally massage their idea into the programmed backbone of Akihabara. Managing to convince 30 companies that airing an art project in their selling environment is a good idea, is no small feat. And so Akihabara TV was born. In the christening words of the press release for the project, Command N stated that "The main focus of Akihabara TV is to use as many TV monitors, in as many shops as possible in the area for an art installation. Putting a video in the deck and pressing PLAY starts the project. Visitors to Akihabara automatically become the audience of the Akihabara TV program."

Twenty-five contemporary artists from 11 countries such as Korea, Canada, Australia, UK and Austria were asked to make one-minute videos for a specific shop. Artists such as Lee Wen, Gregory Maass and Hiroko Ichihara produced short, sharp video pieces upon the premise that they already knew the context of Akihabara and therefore could make knowledgable critical comment. Akihabara TV is due to be aired again in February 2000 with works from internationally reputed artists to first time video makers. The emphasis being on the video rather than on the CV outlining the obvious but often forgotten ideal of idea before identity.

DX RAIDEN

NOTES

Akihabara TV homepage can be reached by e-mail at <http://www.sfc.keio.ac.jp/~kazhiko/aktiv.html> Command N can be reached at chiaki-s@ga2.so-net.ne.jp