JAPAN

INSIDE

OUTSIDE

INBETWEEN

a three part video program investigating the representation of Japan
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Since the end of World War II, Japan and the United States have participated in a partnership based on mutual needs, reciprocal resources and a perceived common enemy, the Soviet Union. Now, with the Soviet Union disintegrated, the symbiotic relationship between the two nations has begun to shift. Policies forged to win the Cold War have left the U.S. and Japan vulnerable: a half century of defense-driven economic strategy has allowed the U.S. to emerge as the political victor of the Cold War, while Japan — which prospered under U.S. protection and an impose constitution provision that limits military expenditure — appears to be the economic winner.

Although the U.S. has become the only remaining military superpower, it has accomplished this dubious feat at a high cost, by becoming one of the world's largest debtor nations. Meanwhile, rising from the economic and political devastation of the Second World War, Japan has become an economic superpower and the world's second largest economy — by rechanneling military power in exchange for access to global markets.

This post-Cold War reversal of fortunes has produced renewed tensions among longtime allies. As the U.S. economy staggers under the weight of government debt and burdensome trade deficits, Japan and the Japanese are becoming acceptable targets for America's economic anxieties. Our mass media images, both contrived and inadvertent, resonate with concerns about political and economic potency: Oldsmobile commercials allude to the diminutive "size" of Japanese men; President Bush is pictured prostate at the imperial dining table. An array of recent non-fiction publications feature alarming, even paranoid, titles such as "The Coming War with Japan," "The Japan That Is," and "Japanese America: How the Japanese Are Colonizing Vital U.S. Industries." As American anxiety grows, Japan is represented not as an economic competitor, but as a predatory archival.

The apprehensions and aspersions have not been unilateral; prominent Japanese politicians have recently begun commenting on the decline of American industry. Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa and Speaker of the Lower House of the Diet, Yoshihiko Kono, have characterized U.S. workers as "lacking work ethic," "lazy," and "illiterate." As tensions heighten, the formerly synergetic notion of the alliance between Japan and the U.S. is obscured; the interlocking partnership which built Japanese economic power and U.S. political dominance may give way to a less cooperative, potentially dangerous, relationship.

In the face of these strained relations, JAPAN: OUTSIDE/INSIDE/INBETWEEN, a program of independent media art by Japanese, American, and Japanese-Americans, suggests that U.S. perceptions of this Asian nation may be as flawed as Japanese characterizations of American workers.

Outside Looking In

The U.S.-Japan Cold War partnership yielded considerable cultural exchange; many of the videotapes featured in Part 1: Outside Looking In were produced by artists who visited Japan with the support of cultural exchange programs, including Gaia Hill, Edin Velez, Bill Viola, and Steina and Woody Vasulka turned their attention to representing Japan with the support of the Japan Foundation's "video clip" program. Their video investigations consider Japan as tourists might view any exotic locale.

With this Baedeker's point of view, these artists examine the surface of the Japanese culture by picturing those sports and games, arts and rituals, landscapes and architectures that are distinctly Japanese. Sumo wrestling, pachinko betting, Butoh, Noh and Kabuki performances, Shinto ritual and festivals, bamboo forests, rice paddies and active volcanic flows, ancient wooden temples, gardens of raked pebbles, velvety-cushioned subway benches, Shinjukus Bullet trains and shimmering neon-lit urban landscapes are among the visual materials from which these artists construct their visions of Japan.

While their material appears similar, each brings their own distinct artistic concerns to the foreign subject. Hill, well-known for his investigations of language, unveils Japanese palindromes (words or phrases that read the same backwards and forwards) in Ura-Aru (The Backside Exists). Viola, renowned for his romantic renderings of light against landscape, lights the subject and metaphors in Hatsu Yume (First Dream); Fishermen use light as bait as their nets sweep an inkyl black sea at night; the dazzling neon displays of the Tokyo skyline are viewed through the eyes of an inhabitant. The Vasulkas, pioneers in the use of video synthesizers, use digital animation in their video of the Land of the Elevator Girls to capture the motion of a traditional elevator door which opens and closes to reveal glimpses of Japan's landscape, architecture and daily life. And Velez, known for his numerous anthropological video essays, overlays to traditional ritualistic and popular culture to suggest the tensions in this rapidly modernized nation in The Meaning of the Interval.

These individual, even idiosyncratic, views of Japan maintain considerable distance from their subjects. For the tourist, the culture is always just at hand, yet out of reach; for the voyeur, the object of desire is visually present, if physically and emotionally absent. Relying on visual imagery, both traditional and modern, this series of video essays functions without narrative structure or voice-overs — these artists keep the history and significance of particular cultural practices at arm's length. The risk of such a position is that an artist may inadvertently eroticize, rather than illuminate, the culture depicted. For the Japanese viewer, these tapes may appear to be evocative homages to a language and culture of Japanese daily life, while for the Western audiences, these tapes may offer visually provoking images of an exotic "other.

Though also foreigners to Japan, video-makers Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker take a different approach to representing Japanese culture. Rather than attempting the risky business of relying on pictures alone to do the work of a traditional narrative, these two producers employ a traditional form: the narrative documentary essay. While they utilize a conventional Western narrative structure, the team avoids the usual Westerner's focus on Japanese traditions art by investigating a popular phenomenon. The result — The Japanese Version — is a skillfully researched, insightful travelogue focusing on the Japanese propensity to import, assimilate and reinterpret foreign ideas, customs and objects.

The Japanese Version's focus on one aspect of Japanese popular culture allows an unusually close view of the contradictions in Japanese life. Despite the clinical allure urban landscapes, the themes of things foreign, adapting and perfecting them for their own cultural context. And, while the Japanese have a well-deserved reputation for elegant refinement, their love of kitsch commercials — musical toilet paper holders that play a few bars of "For Elise" and love hotel suites decorated with Disney, Snoopy and Mickey Mouse characters — is less well known.

Alvarez and Kolker explore these seeming incongruities with tours to a shrine where an Elvis statue is strewn with fresh flowers; to a Tokyo bar where Japanese business- men dress up in full "cowboy regalia," saddle up their cowboy tunes and reinterpret the meaning of the Wild West; and to a wedding palace where a Shinto marriage ceremony incorporates a three-tiered six-seated high Western-style wedding cake fabricated out of rubber.

John Goss' OUT Takes investigates another aspect of Japanese popular culture, focusing on a popular children's television program, Maiko Osawaga Shenshujin (We're Always Making Trouble). By repositioning excerpts from the show with two U.S. television programs, Pee Wee's Playhouse and Rex Redux, Goss reveals the homoerotic subtexts in each of the shows. In so doing, sexual orientations often represented as outside both main-stream Japanese and American culture are brought inside... and out of the closet.

These varied approaches to representing Japanese traditional and popular culture share a single limitation: they are all, whether visually provocative or particularly informative, dual depictions of Japanese culture from an outsider's perspective. The self-representation of Japanese video makers, featured in Part 2: An Inside View, offers an intimate, sometimes surprising, portrait of Japanese culture through the eyes of independent video artists.

An Inside View

Japanese independent media productions offer an unexpectedly self-critical look at Japanese culture. In spite of a dearth of opportunities for exhibition and screening, Japanese video artists persevere with their productions, addressing an array of concerns, both serious and comical.

Visual Brains, an ongoing collaboration by Sei Kizamoto and Hotsumi Ohtsu, has taken on a five-part project that satirically interprets illogical aspects of Japanese life. To date they have completed De-Sign, Volume 1-3, which are featured in this program. Volume
The parallel stories of thwarted female ambitions are fiercely critical of a society that asks women to realize their ambitions vicariously, through husbands and sons.

The male-female, public-private, office-home division of labor that Iidemitsu critiques in her female perspective raises another, similarly oppressive outcome in the sad monotonous daily life of the overworked "salaryman," or office worker. Akihiro Higuchi's CUE portrays a "day in the life of a salaryman;" as Owellian's Alila claims, "Everybody is looking for peace and happy family life" a beleaguered businessman races from bedroom to bathroom to office, where he drifts into a nostalgic reverie for an agrarian Japanese past. CUE, much like S-7S Hi-Cook, decries a culture where regulation rules and all activities occur on cue, to a unified rhythm, and with the consensus of the group.

Each of these works—from Iidemitsu's early omniscient internal video monitor to Higuchi's televised propaganda—registers opinions about the technological miracle of television. While television technology may bring us closer together, the heightened availability of information suggests possibilities for social control that are deeply disconcerting. In Osamu Nagato's The Other Side, the television set becomes a narrowing tunnel through which one might crawl to reverse the flow of information and catch a glimpse of an actual family, instead of a sitcom stereotype. Yoshitaka Shimono's The Strangers' Curtain is reminiscent of yet distinct from, an American media event Art Farm's Media Burn, in which a souped-up Cadillac careened into a pyramid of television sets. Rather than producing a towering pyramid, Shimono takes a particularly Japanese approach: his television sets are electronically wired within sets as each is sequentially demolished. Along with these critical reflections on Japanese society, an Inside View also offers a lighter, more playful perspective with Hiroshi Arimura's Hanyuu, a thinly veiled satire of good triumphing over evil in Mechanical and Angel; Junji Kajima's electronic graffiti session in Traverse Verge; and Jun Ariyoshi's paintbox self-portrait in SelfImage.

Individuals, In Between

Individuals, by virtue of geographical relocation, biological inheritance, economic circumstances, and chance, are inevitably positioned between cultures. While Japanese society values purity and homogeneity, privileging notions of "insider" and "outsider"—of Japanese and "gaigin"—the subject positions are not entirely fixed and immutable. Reciprocally, American culture, with its melting pot—and, more recently, mosaic—metaphors, suggests that all immigrants may be integrated into a grand heterogeneous multiculural society, but offers no certain guarantees of equality.

Third generation Japanese-American artist Rina Tajiri and Naoko Hata reflect on one of this failed heterogeneity: the internment of their family members by the U.S. War Relocation Authority. In Video Memory, Tajiri juxtaposes Hollywood film images and U.S. government newsreel footage of the Second World War and Japanese relocation against her mother's story of her family's detention at Poston internment camp. Official history and visual memory collide to produce pictures of the painful event. Similarly, Tanaka tells the story of her mother's detention at Manzanar in Memories from the Department of Amnesia. Forced to sell her property and relocate, separated from her husband who was arrested by the FBI, her mother's life was irrevocably damaged; her story reveals the long term affects of the internment etched into a portrait of one detained life.

Mixed heritage video-makers Gavin Flint and Ruth Lounsbury each comment on their positions as individuals of dual ethnic backgrounds, as persons who are neither clearly Japanese nor American. Lounsbury's "Haling the Bones" tells the story of her inheritance: a can of bones that she keeps on a shelf in her closet. The bones are half of the remains of her Japanese grandmother; the rest are located in a cemetery in Tokyo. Through a narrative and visual collage composed of stories and home movies and documentary footage, this work-in-progress traces 100 years of her maternal family history from Japan to America as she attempts to set the bones to rest. Intimate relationships and commitments forged between individuals can mitigate cultural differences. An example of one such relationship is a story told by Alan Berliner. In
Program Notes

Part 1: Outside Looking In
February 13 - March 21

Program 1
(Running time: 57 minutes)

Kinema No Yoru (Film Night) by Peter Callas
(2:15, 1986, in Japanese) collages computer-ani-
mated images from Japanese and Western films and
popular culture in an electronic celebration of
visual culture. Callas, who makes his home in
Tokyo, Sydney and New York, produces a tape
that revels in the split-second pleasures that
electronic media provide. ( Distributed by Elec-
tronic Arts Intermix, New York City)

The Japanese Version by Louis Alvarez and
Andrew Koker (55:00 minutes, 1990, in
English) is a surprising and entertaining look at
what happens to Western influences when they
reach Japan. While today Japan is the world’s biggest
exporter of electronics and automobiles, for a thousand
years the Japanese have been insatiably importing ideas,
customs and objects from the rest of the world. Produced by
two “outsiders.” The Japanese Version goes beyond the
usual stereotypical images of Japan to reveal Japanese
reinterpretations of Western culture — from Tokyo business-
men in letter-perfect cowboy outfits, to the institution of the
“love hotel,” where each suite is decorated in a different
Western fantasy. ( Distributed by The Center for New Ameri-
can Media, New York City)

Program 2
(Running time: 59 minutes)

Ura Aru (The Backside Exists) by Gary Hill
(28:30, 1988, in Japanese and English) conforms palindromic word-
play (words or phrases reading the same backwards and
forwards) to the underlying structure of the Japanese Noh
drama. Noh is a drama of essential dualities — characteris-
tically, two principles exact connections between mortal
deeds and otherworldly consequences in mythic narratives
that unfold in two scenes. In a series of compounded dualities
mimetic of Noh, Hill composes evocative acoustic palin-

Photo: this page “Kinema No Yoru”, opposite page: top “The
Meaning of the Interval”, bottom “Kiyoko’s Situation”.

Program 3
(Running time: 62 minutes)

Hatsu Yume (First Dream) by Bill Viola (56:00,
1981) evokes a vision of the Japanese culture and land-
scape in which perceptual shifts assert the relative nature of
all observations. An immortal rock on a mountaintop
appears to change in size and scale with the shifting
passage of time and light; an urban scene is illuminated
by a single match; fishermen trawl on a black ocean at night,
hauling in luminous squids using light as bait. Throughout,
Viola creates haunting allegories of light as a metaphysical
construct. (“Hatsu yume” refers to the first dream of the
new year, which is thought to have portentous significance for the
year that will follow.) (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix,
New York City)

In the Land of the Elevator Girls by Steina and
Woody Vasulka (4:12, 1990) uses the elevator as a meta-
aphorical vehicle to reveal an outsider’s gaze into contempo-
rary Japanese culture. The continual opening and closing of
elevator doors serves as a succinct formal device, as the
viewer is offered brief glimpses of a series of landscapes —
natural, urban, cultural and domestic. Doors open onto
doors to reveal layers of public and private vision, transport-
ing the viewer from theatrical performances and street
to an elevator surveillance camera’s recording of everyday life.
(Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City)

dromes by reversing Japa-
"hara/arach" ( kills. "usu/ usa" couples tomorrow with melancholy, and "ama/ame" makes an
offering to rain. English counterparts like "live/ evil" anglicize the dynamic. Hill reverses words to re-
lease their double, and in an evocative sequence of these mir-
rored pairs, Ura Aru envisions this process as a ritual
renewal of counterpart realms. ( Distributed by Electronic
Arts Intermix, New York City)

The Meaning of the Interval by Edwin Velez (18:40,
1987) is an evocative essay that explores the inherent
contradictions of contemporary Japan, from the rituals of
Shinto religion to the nation’s fascination with Western pop
culture. Constructing a densely layered, nonlinear weave of
the mythical and the everyday, Velez probes beneath the
surface to unearth ancient, often anarchic tensions. In
Velez’s collage, emblems of contemporary Japan — the
Bullet train, businessmen and McDonald’s — collide with
traditional ritual, from Kabuki and Sumo to Shinto. The
“interval” of the title relates to the Japanese concept of "mo" —
the space between things, a source of energy, tension and
balance. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York
City)

OUT Takes by John Goss (13:00,
1989, in Japanese and English, with English titles) repositions
excerpts from two U.S. televi-
sion programs — Pee Wee’s Playhouse, Rex Reed’s At
the Movies — and one popular children’s show from Japan —
Maiko Osawaga Seshimaru (We’re Always Making
Trouble) — to reveal the homosexual subtexts in each.
In so doing, sexual orientations often repre-
sented as outside both mainstream Japanese and
American culture are brought inside... and out of
the closet. (Distributed by the Video Data Bank, Chicago)
Part 2: An Inside View
April 9 - 25

Program 1:
(Running time: 62 minutes)

Kiyoko’s Situation by Makio Idenitsu (24:19, 1989, in Japanese with English subtitles) articulates the deeply embedded cultural roles of Japanese women through the parallel stories of two female artists, Kiyoko and Tani. In Idenitsu’s narrative-within-a-narrative, “Kiyoko’s situation” is played out on a television monitor within Tani’s drama. Tani is paralyzed in her attempts to paint by her feeling that, as a single woman, she has failed in society’s eyes. Kiyoko, a young woman viciously criticized by her husband and family for her fierce determination to paint, eventually compromises her art for “maternal duty.” As Kiyoko compiles with the family, Tani, isolated and despairing, is driven to suicide. Idenitsu’s chillingly omniscient television monitor, which acts as the psychological “other,” metaphorically and literally condemns Tani to death. In the final cruel irony, she hangs herself, using the television monitor as a jumping-off point. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Internix, New York City.)

De-Sign, Volumes 1-3, by Visual Brains (Sei Kazama and Hiroshi Nishiyama). De-Sign 1: Kunren (8:10, 1989, in Japanese with English subtitles) comments on the transition from the Showa period to the Heisei era, which occurred with the death of Emperor Hirohito. In Kunren, which means “disciplined training” or “rehearsal,” Visual Brains alludes to the widely held belief that Hirohito, who fell ill near the end of 1989, was kept alive throughout the end of the year so that the New Year’s holiday would not be interrupted and the millions of New Year’s cards mailed by Japanese would not become instantly obsolete.

De-Sign 2: 5-7-5 Hi-Cook (9:37, 1990, in Japanese with English subtitles). Classic examples of the Japanese haiku form, which is based on a 5-7-5 rhythm, usually comment ironically on political or social situations. In 5-7-5 Hi-Cook, Visual Brains comments on current political and social conditions and this rhythmic structure that recurs throughout Japan’s daily life, in the announcements of newscasters, the slogans of advertising campaigns and the roadside messages of police officers.

De-Sign 3: Stand-Drift (20:00, 1990, in Japanese with English subtitles) looks at the Japanese dilemma in the face of the Persian Gulf War. Japan, which relies entirely on foreign oil, could have seen all industry paralyzed within 90 days if the war had interrupted oil shipments. Although the Japanese government bowed to pressure from the international community and agreed to partially finance the war, a constitutional provision which prohibits military activity prevented more active participation. As a result of the situation, the Japanese public become avid spectators to this war, watching CNN reports as dramatic entertainment. Stand-Drift paints a picture of a stereotypical Japanese woman’s daily concerns — finding an attractive mate, keeping a slim figure, perfecting one’s makeup — against the critical televised moments of the Persian Gulf War. (Distributed by the artists.)

Program 2:
(Running time: 53 minutes)

The Other Side by Osamu Nagata (9:30, 1990) offers an image of the television set as a narrow tunnel through which one might crawl to reverse the flow of information and catch a glimpse on actual family, instead of a sit-com stereotype. (Distributed by the artist.)

TV Drama by Yoshikata Shimano (7:20, 1987) applies the concept of the nested set of boxes to a series of television sets that are sequentially destroyed. As a craftsman might fashion a set of perfectly fitted boxes, Shimano devises a tightly knit minimalist set of television demoliitions. (Distributed by the artist.)


Ph by Dumb Type (30:00, 1991) documents the Ph performance by the Tokyo-based multi-media group Dumb Type, who combine talents in the visual arts, architecture, theatre, music, dance and computer programming to create elaborate interdisciplinary events. Their work melds traditional Japanese design concepts with technological advances to shape new systems for creative interaction. Commenting on their work, Dumb Type wrote: "Technology today has in many ways created a network covering the globe, making the world smaller, and sending accurate information tens of thousands of miles, from point A to point B, in just a few seconds. In reality, however, when we try to communicate, for example, the few words 'I love you', just these three words, we are forced to realize the vast distances that lie between us..." (Distributed by the artists.)

Kewpie doll-mechanic hero and his angelic associate. These cartoon figures duke it out in a classic fight of "good" vs. "evil" that uses one of Japan’s favorite Western imports — the kewpie doll — as a symbol of the good influences and happiness that have come from the Western world. (Distributed by SCAN Gallery, Tokyo.)

Cue by Akiko Higuchi (20:00, 1990, in Japanese) portrays a "day in the life" of a salariman; as Orwellian TV commercials announce that "Everybody is looking for peace and happy family life," an overworked businessman races from bedroom to bathroom to office, where he drifts into a nostalgic reverie for an agrarian Japanese past. Like the brooding "shishokesu" novels of the Meiji period, Cue registers a profound ambivalence about modern life. (Distributed by SCAN Gallery, Tokyo.)

Self Image by Jun Ariyoshi (4:35, 1991, in Japanese-English) for Western cultures, "two faced" is a rather disparaging comment on a person’s character. In Japanese culture, to have "hyakumonso," which means, literally, "to have 100 faces," is a great compliment, indicating that a person is worldly, clever and flexible. Ariyoshi’s visually lush Self Image puts forward a variety of possible faces, from fashionable to clownish to garish and purposeful. (Distributed by SCAN Gallery, Tokyo.)

Program 3:
(Running time: 41 minutes)

Mechanic and Angel by Hiroshi Araki (16:30, 1990). In this animated morality tale, Tiananmen Telephone Company devils are defeated through the skillful work of our
Part 3: Individuals, In Between
May 7-23

Program 1: (Running time: 43 minutes)

Memories from the Department of Amnesia by Janice Tanaka (1989, 12:50 min, in English) is a deeply personal reflection upon the loss of a parent — specifically, Tanaka’s mother. Memory is at the core of this poignant work, in which Tanaka transforms the autobiographical into the universal. Stages of mourning — evasion, fear, grief, denial and remembrance — are rendered as a series of evocative visual metaphors. Transfigured through Tanaka’s characteristically lush image processing, haunting images are complemented with a collage of photographs, voice-over and text, which together recount a personal history of her mother’s life. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.)

Program 2: (Running Time: 60 minutes)

Intimate Stranger by Allan Berliner (60:00, 1991, in English) tells the story of Berliner’s grandfather, Joseph Cassuto, a Palestinian Jew raised in Egypt who relocated to Brooklyn and Osaka, as he formed a life long connection with a lifetime affiliation with a Japanese textile company. The bond, which continued during and after the devastation of the Second World War, brought Cassuto neither wealth nor fame, but instead afforded him a unique cultural position, as an “honorable special foreigner.” (Distributed by the artist.)

Program 3: (Running Time: 61 minutes)

Drift by Gavin Flint (10:00, 1991) Using footage from the American television program Hart to Hart, which is a favorite among Japanese audiences, Flint considers the myriad ways in which meaning is fractured by translation. Flint constructs a hypothetical situation wherein the English original for the program is lost and the show is translated back into English and once again into Japanese, rendering the dialogue nonsensical. By amplifying the “drift” of meaning which occurs in translations, Flint suggests the fragility of cross-cultural communication. (Distributed by the artist.)

Halving the Bones by Ruth Lounsbury (work-in-progress, 19:00, 1992) tells the story of the filmmaker, a half Japanese woman living in New York, who has inherited a can of bones that she keeps on a shelf in her closet. The bones are half of the remains of her Japanese grandmother; the rest are located in a cemetery in Tokyo. Through a narrative and visual collage comprised of family stories, home movies and documentary footage, the film traces 100 years of her maternal family history from Japan to America as she attempts to set the bones to rest.

Video Girls and Video Song for Navaho Sky by Shigeko Kubota (31:56, 1973). Kubota writes, “This is a video fusion of synthesized image and video document. I went to the Navajo Reservation and stayed with a Navajo family for 40 days. This is my video diary of women who I met in Arizona, Tokyo, Europe, and New York. I carried my portable, instead of a baby.” Kubota creates an ironic collage of radically disparate cultural contexts. Navajo riding a horse-drawn cart to a public well are contrasted with erotic cabaret dancers; a Navajo woman slaughtering sheep is juxtaposed with a performance art piece involving a dead goat and a naked man. Featuring Kubota’s often haunting and witty electronic manipulation, this video document is an autobiographical journal of cultural identity and difference. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City.)