investigating the representation of Japan
JAPAN
OUTSIDE/INSIDE/INBETWEEN

a three part video program
investigating the representation of Japan

Part 1:
OUTSIDE LOOKING IN
February 13 - March 21, 1992

Part 2:
AN INSIDE VIEW
April 9 - 25, 1992

Part 3:
INDIVIDUALS, IN BETWEEN
May 7 - 23, 1992

Organized by
Micki McGee with Yumi Saijo

Artists Space
223 West Broadway
New York, NY 10013
Meanwhile, rising from the economic and political devastation by becoming one of the world's largest debtor nations. The coming of the world's largest debtor nations appears to be the economic winner. 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 dismantled, the symbiotic relationship between the two nations has begun to shift. Policies forged to win the Cold War have left the U.S. in a position of the Second World War, Japan has become an economic superpower, its second-largest economy — by relinquishing military power in exchange for access to global markets.

As tensions heighten, the formerly synergic nature of 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 Westerners, Japanese, 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 visioned the future with the support of Japan's cultural exchange programs. Prominent video artists including Gary Hill, Edin Alvarez, and Velez, known for his numerous anthropological video essays, overlays images of traditional ritual with popular culture to suggest the tensions in this rapidly modernized nation in *The Meaning of the Inter-Vational*. These individual, even idiosyncratic, views of Japan maintain considerable distance from their subject. For the tourist, the culture is always just at hand, yet out of reach; for the voyeur, the object of desire is visually palpitating, physically absent. Focusing on visual images (or, in Hill's case, non-narrative palindromic reversals) — functioning 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 the rituals and realities of Japanese daily life, while for the Western audiences, these tapes may offer visually provocative images of an exotic "other." Though also foreigners to Japan, video artists Kyoko K. Kubo and Andrew Kolker take a different approach to representing Japanese culture. Rather than attempting the risky business of portraying a culture, these artists abandon any attempt to do the work of art that words, the two producers employ a traditional form: the narrative documentary essay. While they utilize a conventional Western narrative structure, the team avoids the risky business of representing the visual Western perspective. In these traditional arts 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 popular culture allows an unusually close view of the contradictions in Japanese society. Despite the Japanese desire to maintain an ethnically homogeneous character, there are outward imports of things foreign, adopting and perfecting them for their own cultural context. And, while the Japanese have a well-deserved reputation for elegant refinement, their love of kitsch commodities — musical toilet paper holders that play a few bars of "For Elise" and love hotel suites decorated with Disney, Snoopy and Muppets characters — is less well-known. Alvarez and Kolker explore these seeming incongruities with tours to a shrine where an Elvis statue is kissed by fresh flowers, to a Tokyo bar where Japanese businessmen dress up in full cowboy regalia, sing cowboy tunes and reinterpret the meaning of the Wild West. This "new" world where the Shinjuto marriage ceremony incorporates a three-tiered sixteen-foot high Western-style wedding cake fabricated out of rubber.

The Coming War with Japan, *The Japan That Con Say "No"*

John Goss' OUT Takes investigates another aspect of Japanese popular culture, focusing on a popular children's television program, *Maico Osawago Seshimasu* (We're Always Making Trouble). By repositioning excerpts from show with two U.S. television programs, Pee Wee's Playhouse and Rex Reed's *The Movies*, Goss reveals the homosexual subtexts in each of the shows. In so doing, sexual orientations Otherwise invisible to both mainstream Japanese and American culture are brought inside... and out of the closet. These varied approaches to representing Japanese tradi- tional and popular culture share a single limitation: they are all, whether visually provocative or particularly informative, depictions of Japanese culture from an outsider's perspec- tive. The self-referential approach featured in Part 2: An Inside View, offers an intimate, sometimes surprising, view of Japanese culture through the eyes of independent video artists.

**An Inside View**


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**Japanese independent media productions offer an unexpectedly self-critical look at Japanese culture.** In spite of a heavy media presence, Japanese video artists persevere with their productions, addressing an array of concerns, both serious and comical.
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 Idemitsu critiques from the female perspective has another, similarly oppressive outcome in the "sadly monotonous" "salonry" of office work. Akihiro Higuchi's CUE portrays a "day in the life" of a "salonry"-an Orwellian TV commercials announce that "Everybody is looking for peace and happy family life," a belated businesswoman races from one telesets to the other in her bathroom, where she drifts into a nostalgic reverie for an agrarian Japanese past. CUE, much like 5-7-5 Hi-Cook, decodes a culture where regulation rules and all activities occur in a fixed, unchanging rhythm, and with the consensus of the group.

Each of these works—from Idemitsu's eerily optimistic internal video monitor to Higuchi's televised propaganda—registers suspicions about the rhythm of Japanese television. While television technology may bring us closer together, the heightened availability of information suggests possibilities for social control that are deeply disquieting. In Osamu Nagato's The Other Side, the television set becomes a narrow tunnel through which one might crawl to reverse the flow of information and catch a glimpse of an actual family, instead of a slickam stereotype. Yoshitaka Shimano's TV Drama is reminiscent of, yet distinct from, an American media event Ant Farm's Media Burn, in which a group of Cadillac carcasses are driven into a pyramid of television sets. Rather than producing an actual range of television sets on the pyramid's face, Shimano takes a particularly Japanese approach: his television sets are not arranged in a pyramid but instead are arranged in a square, which is sequentially demolished. In Drift he explores the theological reflections on Japanese society, An Inside View also affords a lighter, more playfully ironic view of the television set with Higuchi's animated moral tale of good triumphing over evil in Me-chanic and Angel, Junji Kojima's electronic graffiti session in Trance Verge, and Jun Akiyoshi's visual callage comprised of family lies and stories, home movies and documentary footage, this work-in-progress reveals the long term affect of the internment etched into the group.

Mixed heritage videomakers Gavin Flint and Ruth Lounsbury each comment on their positions as individuals of dual ethnic backgrounds, as persons between clearly separated ethnic groups. Flint, who was born to an American father and a Eurasian mother and was raised in Japan, has a curious relationship to the Japanese-American dichotomy. In Drift he explores this anomalous situation by considering the displacement of a narrator who, raised on Western television programs dubbed into Japanese, always considered the displacement of a narrator who, raised on Western television programs dubbed into Japanese, always assumed that John Wayne spoke fluent Japanese. Lounsbury's Home Movie: The Bones tells of her family history and Japanese relocation against her mother's story of her family's detention at Tanforan internment camp. Official history and popular media representations obscure the picture of the painful event. Similarly, Tanaka tells the story of her mother's detention at Manzanar in Memories of the Departed, 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 effects of the internment etched into the group.

Individuals, in Between

Individuals, by virtue of geographical relocation, biological inheritance, or intimate relationships, frequently find themselves positioned between cultures. While Japanese society valorizes purity and homogeneity, privileging notions of "insider" and "outsider"—of culture and race—these subject positions are not entirely fixed and immutable. Reciprocally, American culture, with its melting pot— and, more recently, mosaic—metaphors, suggests that all members of society are integrated into a grand heterogeneous multicultural society, but offers no guarantee of equality. Third generation Japanese-American artists Rea Tajiri and Janice Tanaka reflect on one outcome of this failed heterogeneity: the internment of their family members by the U.S. Relocation Authority in History and Memory, Tajiri juxtaposes Hollywood film images and U.S. government newsreel footage of their forced relocation and Japanese relocation against her mother's story of her family's detention at Poston internment camp. Official history and popular media representations obscure the picture of the painful event. Similarly, Tanaka tells the story of her mother's detention at Manzanar in Memories of the Departed, 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 effects of the internment etched into the group.

Taken together, these programs that comprise JAPAN: OUTSIDE/INSIDE/IN-BETWEEN map out a terrain where Japanese and American culture intersect, overlap and diverge. In charting this territory, these video explorations suggest that the relationship between Japan and the U.S.—thoroughly alien—is on the one hand as much outsiders to Native American culture as they are to Japanese culture; that the "melting pot" of American idealogy may be as mythical as the ethnic purity ascribed to the Japanese culture. While television technology may bring us closer together, the heightened availability of information suggests possibilities for social control that are deeply disquieting. In Drift he explores the theological reflections on Japanese society, An Inside View also affords a lighter, more playfully ironic view of the television set with Higuchi's animated moral tale of good triumphing over evil in Me-chanic and Angel, Junji Kojima's electronic graffiti session in Trance Verge, and Jun Akiyoshi's visual callage comprised of family lies and stories, 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

Intimate Stranger, Berliner tells the story of his grand- father, Joseph Cassuto, a Palestinian Jew who relocated from Egypt to Brooklyn to Osaka and formed a lifelong 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 a "honor- able special foreigner." Finally, longtime U.S resident and pioneering video artist, Shigeko Kubota brings the "outsider" metaphor full circle as she impersonates Navajo, Tokyo and New York culture. As an immigrant to the U.S. and an outsider to Native American culture, Kubota's work explores the cultural differences in Video Girls and Video Songs for Navajo Sky, a video diary of her forty day stay at the Chinle, Arizona Navajo reservation. Her electronic collage comprises disparate cultural images—Navajo taking a horse-drawn cart to a public well are contrasted with erotic cabinet dancers; a Navajo woman slaughtering a sheep is juxtaposed with a performance art piece. Her diary suggests that the "melting pot" of American idealogy may be as mythical as the ethnic purity ascribed to the Japanese culture. While television technology may bring us closer together, the heightened availability of information suggests possibilities for social control that are deeply disquieting. In Drift he explores the theological reflections on Japanese society, An Inside View also affords a lighter, more playfully ironic view of the television set with Higuchi's animated moral tale of good triumphing over evil in Me-chanic and Angel, Junji Kojima's electronic graffiti session in Trance Verge, and Jun Akiyoshi's visual callage comprised of family lies and stories, 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
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-animated 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 ravels in the split-second pleasures that electronic media provide. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City)

The Japanese Version by Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker (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 businessmen 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 American 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 — characteristically, two principles enact 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 palindromes by reversing Japanese words: “hara/aroh” binds belly to heart, “asu/usa” couples tomorrow with melancholy, and “ema/ame” makes an offering to rain. English counterparts like “live/evil” anglicize the dynamic. Hill reverses words to release their doubles, and in an evocative sequence of these mirrored 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 Edin 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 “ma” — the space between things, a source of energy, tension and balance. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City)

OUTTakes by John Goss (13:00, 1989, in Japanese and English, with English titles) repossession excerpts from two U.S. television programs — Pee Wee’s Playhouse, Rex Reed’s At the Movies — and one popular children’s show from Japan — Maido Osawaga Seshimosu (We’re Always Making Trouble) — to reveal the homosexual subtexts in each. In so doing, sexual orientations often represented as outside both mainstream Japanese and American culture are brought inside, and out of the closet. (Distributed by the Video Data Bank, Chicago)

Program 3
(Running time: 62 minutes)

Hatsu Yume (First Dream) by Bil Viola (56:00, 1981) evokes a vision of the Japanese culture and landscape in which perceptual shifts assert the relative nature of all observations. An immobile rock on a mountainside 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 Steinia and Woody Vasulka (4:12, 1990) uses the elevator as a metaphorical vehicle to reveal an outsider’s gaze into contemporary 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, transporting the viewer from theatrical performances and streetscapes to an elevator surveillance camera’s recording of everyday life. (Distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix, New York City)

Photo: this page “Kinema No Yoru”, opposite page: top “The Meaning of the Interval”, bottom “Kiyoko’s Situation”.
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 became avid spectators to this war, watching CNN reports as dramatic entertainment. Stand-Drift paints a picture of a stereotypical Japanese situation, the Japanese public became avid spectators to this war, watching CNN reports as dramatic entertainment.

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 the viewer is granted access to the flow of information and the many faces of TV. This is a show that deconstructs the television set as one of the cultural touchstones of contemporary Japan.

TV Drama by Yoshitaka 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 minimalistic set of television demolitions. (Distributed by the artist.)


Ph by Dumb Type (30:00, 1991) documents the Ph performance by the Kyoto-based multime-dia group Dumb Type, who combine talents in the visual arts, architecture, theatre, music, dance and computer programming to create elaborate inter-disciplinary events. Their work melds traditional Japanese design concepts with technological advances to shape new systems for creative interaction. Com-pleted 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 works ‘I love you’, just these three words, we are forced to realize the vast distances that lie between us...” (Distributed by the artist.)

Program 3: (Running time: 41 minutes)

Mechanic and Angel by Hiroshi Araki (16:30, 1990). In this animated morality tale, Tiansamen Telephone Company devils are defeated through the skillful work of our 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.)

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 “hyaku-men-so”, 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 playful. (Distributed by SCAN Gallery, Tokyo.)
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 life-long 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 lies and 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 portapak, instead of a baby.” Kubota creates an ironic collage of radically disparate cultural contexts. Navajos 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.)
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**JAPAN**

OUTSIDE/INSIDE/INBETWEEN

a three part video program investigating the representation of Japan

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Acknowledgements

Many people have participated in the realization of JAPAN: OUTSIDE/INSIDE/INBETWEEN. Yumi Saijo began working on this program as an intern and rapidly became a full-fledged collaborator on Part 2: An Inside View. She traveled to Japan to secure videotapes, translated dialogue and program notes, and illuminated many aspects of Japanese culture referred to in the tapes in this program. People often say "this show couldn't have been realized without the help of.....", and in this case it's true. Ms. Saijo's work on this exhibition has been indispensable.

The staff at Electronic Arts Intermix -- Stephen Vitiello, Ivar Smedstad, Wellington Love, and Lori Zippay -- were enormously helpful. Wellington and Lori supplied me with program note material from their recently published catalogue, Electronic Arts Intermix: Video——. Stephen acted as a liaison with SCAN Gallery in Tokyo and Ivar compiled the exhibition reeels for the show. I am grateful for their help.

On the Tokyo side, thanks are due to Fujiko Nakaya and Wako Enomoto at SCAN Gallery, who assisted in securing many of the titles featured in Part 2. Carrie Sakai has offered guidance and insight into Japanese culture; I am grateful for her help and support.

Finally, many thanks go to the artists in the exhibition; their work helps illuminate many of the misunderstandings between Japan and the West.

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The video program screens continuously during gallery hours (Tuesday - Saturday, 11-6) and is free to the public.

Many Artists Space video programs are available on VHS tapes for home viewing. Inquire at the front desk or call 212-226-3970 to reserve tapes.


Artists Space programs are made possible, in part, with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, The National Endowment for the Arts (a federal agency), the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, and Materials for the Arts (a program of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the Department of Sanitation).


Artists Space is a member of the National Association of Artists Organizations (NAAO), the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers (NAMAC) and Media Alliance.