

# Traversals: Instructions to the Double



L O N G B E A C H M U S E U M O F A R T



K A P P A

artists from the world over, myself included, have lived in Japan on a long-term basis. There have been videotapes produced "about" Japan by artists from cultures as diverse as those of Yugoslavia, Australia and France. I would speculate that there are probably more tapes produced about Japan, or which employ Japanese themes or motifs, than about any other (foreign) culture.

The mostly one-way flow between the United States and Japan became the almost inevitable focus of this exhibition. I had intended to cover cross-cultural traversals across and around the entire Pacific. The exhibition does not directly incorporate other, more "marginal" corridors, including the trickle of artists and information across the South Pacific between Chile and Australia (Juan Davila and Eugenio Dittborn) or the so-called North-South corridors between First and Third World countries, for example, between Chile and New York in the work, in exile, of Juan Downey, or in the extensive work in South East Asian countries of Ken Feingold and Daniel Reeves. French artist Robert Cahen, whose *Hong Kong Song* has been included in this exhibition, has also made work about Chile, as has the noted French critic and video artist Jean Paul Fargier. Other omissions are Canadian artist Paul Wong's record of his visit to his ancestral home in China, *Ordinary Shadows, Chinese*

*Shade* and Byron Black's tapes relating to his extended sojourns in both Osaka and Thailand. Also not represented here are "border crossings" accomplished exclusively through the appropriation and recontextualization of television images from alien cultures such as John Goss's *"Out" Takes*. Perhaps some of their work will be covered in a future exhibition.

— Peter Callas —  
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#### Footnotes

1. Anne Hoy, *Collaborations*, catalogue, International Center of Photography, New York, 1988.
2. Paul Virilio, "The Last Vehicle," *Looking Back to the End of the World*, D. Camper and Christoph Wulf (eds.), Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, New York, 1989.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
4. Alfred Birnbaum, *EIZOTICISM: Artifice and Prejudice in Japanese Media*, "Andere Sinema, *Europalia: Japan in Belgium*, Antwerp, November, 1989.
5. "Business Week (7 August 1989) reports that when asked whether they felt more threatened economically by Japan or militarily by the Soviet Union, 68 percent of Americans recognized a greater Japanese danger, as against only 22 percent who recognized the traditional enemy." Quoted from Gavan McCormack, "Capitalism Triumphant? The Case of Japan," *Kyoto Journal*, No. 14, Kyoto, 1990, p. 6.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

## In the Land of the Elevator Girls

by Steina, 1989 4:15

U.S.A. / JAPAN



Steina's *In the Land of the Elevator Girls* opens with a wipe from the center of the screen. It is a common visual device used to produce transitions from one scene to another. Steina uses it to simulate the opening doors of an elevator in a department store, attended by an elite mascot of Japanese consumer culture: the elevator girl. Steina becomes our inimical "guide" on a beguiling, forever upward (or is it downward?) ride through the "inscrutable" aspects of vertically structured Japan.

The elevator girls in Steina's tape are to foreign eyes an anachronism. They are superfluous in heaping spurious import on the opening and closing of fully automatic doors, and out of date—a throwback to the time when doors *weren't* automatic and when elevator drivers were a complimentary and somewhat elegant part of Western consumer culture. They are also the most visible emblems of a patronizing and hierarchical patriarchal culture. The fact that they *are* considered to be elite and *do* aspire to do this job (their selection into this job endorses their beauty and they remain aloof, a class apart from the other department store employees) does not enter into, or even begin to equalize, the equation in Western eyes. They remain astounding anachronisms, though to the foreign observer the things they reveal in the opening and closing of the doors they operate are almost as astounding as the girls themselves. We look on dumfounded as the doors of Steina's elevator open to reveal not the expected lingerie department but a bubbling volcanic spring.

The elevator becomes a vehicle which transports us to the unknown, and to the foreigner, almost unknowable destinations. The doors open and close in rapid succession on a Shinto ceremony, an apparently manic person with a robot arm and laser beams extruding from his eyes (performance artist Stelarc), the lobby of a love hotel, a dingy corridor strewn with rubbish, a puppet performance...and so on. Like the videotapes of Edin Velez and Tony Conrad, *In the Land of the Elevator Girls* deals with incongruous and multi-faceted aspects of contemporary Japanese culture in a highly inventive way. Steina does not pretend to explain, only to "reveal" a fraction of a culture which remains almost opaque today as it was when Commodore Perry forced its doors open after more than 250 years of seclusion in the mid nineteenth century.