

# Colorful Experiments in Video Imagery—Yamaguchi Katsuhiko

By Iseki Masaaki

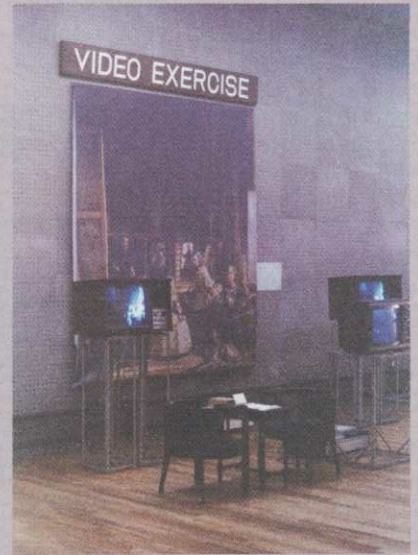
It is commonly agreed that, despite its high-tech advances, Japan has contributed little excellence to "soft" fields, especially the field of artistic expression. There have been very few Japanese artists who use technology to make their artistic statements to the world. But Yamaguchi Katsuhiko is one of the very few; he is also probably one of the most active artists in this field today.

Once World War II was over, Japanese art could take an international perspective and engage freely in exchange. In the 1950s, a group of young artists broke away from academia to embark upon cutting-edge experimental activities. This remarkable group, dubbed the "Experimental Studio," included musician Takemitsu Toru, critic Akiyama Kuniharu, designer Kitadai Shozo, painter Fukushima Hideko, and Yamaguchi Katsuhiko. Active until 1957, the group put on numerous

all-round experimental events integrating theater, music and art. Experimental Studio's experiments prefigured artistic expression of an age in which Japanese society would rapidly go high tech.

Using these experiments as a springboard, Yamaguchi jumped deeper into image exploration, creating *Vitrine*, an objet (kinetic picture) containing plastic-mediated light, which was shown in the 34th Venezia Biennale. He then moved from video installations and imaginariums to increasingly informational forms of environmental sculpture, continuing to experiment with electronics to this day.

Yamaguchi's various experimental works have been called video sculpture, video images, spectacular performances, environmental images, computer art and multimedia images, but all are rooted in the basic concept of the imaginarium. An imaginarium is, technically, a network of video systems combined



Video installation *Las Meninas No. 2* by Yamaguchi Katsuhiko, 1975; six TV monitors, three video tape recorders, one video camera and two copies of *Las Meninas*.

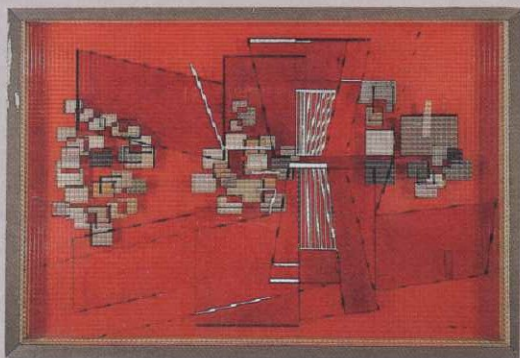


Video sculpture *Black Sun—Homage to Okamoto Taro*—by Yamaguchi Katsuhiko, 1996; five TV monitors, three video tape recorders, acrylic mirror, polyester, wire; H2180XW4080XD4080 mm.



Video sculpture *The Invention of Morel* by Yamaguchi Katsuhiro, 1991; 12 TV monitors, six video tape recorders, one video camera, acrylic columns.

through live satellite imagery, but as a concept it refers to a sculpted space, what must be called a sculpture formed of information. Most famous of these is Yamaguchi's 1974 video exercise interpretation of Spanish painter Diego



Vitrine *Reddish Street* by Yamaguchi Katsuhiro, 1957; glass, oil paints, synthetic paints; H607XW910mm.

Velazquez's *Las Meninas*. This experiment, which bears the same title as the original painting, employs a video media system that allows the viewer to interact with the work to focus on and enjoy any given aspect of it.

Yamaguchi believes that there is an

infinite number of ways to use the world's vast stores of technology and industrial materials as artistic materials and media, and he is very interested in the theories of pioneers Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Frederik Kiesler.

Jasia Reichart, as someone who understands Yamaguchi well, has said, "It is impossible to explain, logically or accurately, how something comes to be called art and, by being exhibited in a museum, is accepted as art. The basis of selection often has less to do with art itself than with social, political or economic pressure . . ."

Ironically, many of Yamaguchi's works can be seen in art museums in Japan, but the concept of his imaginariums are, of course, to open art up to the whole of high-tech society, and in this endeavor his experiments are making steady headway.

He was recognized as one of the world's foremost image artists when his work took the grand prize at the Sixth

Locarno International Video Art Festival in 1985. From his works that make free use of video monitors—*Galaxy Garden*, *Planet Station*, and *Three Passages*—to his laser performances and creation of imaged spaces, he has continued to strive to make images of environmental spaces that speak to the sensitivities of our era.

As Yamaguchi says, for him, a work of art is the sharing of the artist's thought processes with the viewer, an interactivity with an audience going about its daily life through the use of a variety of media.

"We live in an age of electronic media," he says. "Should we be treating works of art as products? Art was originally linked to media in progress . . ."

Now that we have entered the age of multimedia, Yamaguchi Katsuhiro's colorful experiments with imagery will surely provide us with a happy fusion of science and art.

*Iseki Masaaki, an art critic mainly in the field of history of Japanese and Western modern art, is a professor at Meisei University in Tokyo.*