

Autonomy and Political Action

Katsuyuki Kawai, Video Art Center Tokyo

The place here is Japan, Tokyo, Yotsua and our organisation's name is "Video Art Center" Tokyo and this group of artists have come together to create some form of video art. This is probably not the first time such a situation has occurred and lately there have been many movements to create such artist run initiatives or artist collectives, but we are very unique in the fact that we specifically focus on video art.

The aim of the organisation is to offer a place for artists to get access to equipment, also some information on video art history and the current video art scene in the world. This allows Japanese artists and foreigners in Tokyo to get access to a wider dimension of video art.

In some ways video art has to act, have a role, it has to act the role of being the consciousness of society. This is true because it is a reflected and more observational art form.

Yosuke Ito, Puddles

In 1998 we tried to search for and find new exhibition opportunities, because here in Japan there are so called 'rental galleries' where artists can rent the space. So it is very normal and it was very normal for this to happen. During the downfall in the economy, people tended not to use these galleries.

Puddles is based on a network, an artist network. We focused on an organisation not only on artists, like to many groups. Even though it's a small organisation we make links through to different cultures and communities with different backgrounds and so on. We try to make new things through communication with artists.

Peter Bellars, Command N

I was a art critic here for six years and I eventually found my way, which is around the Ginza area, the established gallery area.

I then had to find what else didn't exist along with the museum there. Basically all the galleries in Japan, almost all the galleries are rented by the artist and this I can't understand at all. I can't believe it in fact. So I spent my whole time in the first couple of years as a writer describing things, which are wrong, how I can function with a form of policy control, it's the same as in the love hotel -you pay and you can do what you like.

Then when I met Masato Nakamura. He was the first festival organiser of this project called the Ginza art. It was a Guerilla art activity on the streets of Ginza in the main gallery area. Eight major artists each took over one of the blocks and produced something on a certain Sunday and then the blocks came into a kind of festival and a whole number of other people joined the project. Suddenly, the Ginza became a pedestrian area on Sundays so that no cars could drive through and people could just wonder around. Then the art of this famous area started to appear on the streets and not in the galleries, that was Masato's first idea. It was the first time Nakamura could get a group of artists together. He wasn't Command N but he was a movement of some kind. He did the same thing the following year in Shinjuku, which is where we are now and he also crossed to another place somewhere else as well. After the success of access to this kind of group activity, he had the idea for Command N. I was naturally interested and I was participating too. It's alternative and it didn't cost the artists anything, because we didn't know how much organisation is going on the background. For these there is an organisation but no commission because it's a Guerilla activity. Masato Nakamura moved often to how we could do the same kind of thing and commission somebody interested. And that's why he did this project with "Akihabara TV" where he decided to approach the electrical shops in Akihabara (which is just full of electrical shops with thousands and thousands televisions already lay out). It is a permanent installation but every time you

go there you will see what's on television at that time. He had this idea to take over all the televisions in Akihabara intending to a long time installation.

We have just started up again. Now I think we are about 20 people. Because we only come to start this project again last month, the membership is not entirely secured and we are not exactly sure who is involved. But there used to be five artists and three co-ordinators and now it's entirely run by artists.

We wouldn't be able to do it in another way. All the galleries are commercial and the museums are interested in what we are doing in order to provide and reflect from their own history. Command N. I think is set up simply as a way of being able to control what goes on in your own space and doing things that are not commercial and I've forgotten what I could consider as this. Video is always difficult to sell, but we still can have a show, although if you approach for a gallery they might be not interested because they can't make an income. We have our own gallery, we run our own shows making no profit, that's fine!

Ajako Nakano, Clean Brothers (Osaka)

Cleanbrothers let artists have some cleaning jobs and then they will be given a work-space, the chance to have an exhibition.

It's like a point system; there is a big room divided, there are some big rooms and small rooms. Normally you work 3 or 4 days per month and you get, for example 1 point. Then you can increase the points if you decide that you want a bigger room: the more you work the larger the space. For example, for the smallest room you work 3 days per month and you have to continue for 6 months, then you will get a one-week exhibition.

She wants cleanbrothers to act like a tunnel; people come and join this project. When the artist quits a project they hopefully start doing artwork in other places, then they make connections between cleanbrothers and other artists again. In that way artists can go through the cleanbrothers and then you meet these people as artists again. She wants cleanbrothers to be like a place where artists are passing through.

Hiroshi Yoshioka, Director Kyoto Biennale

My name is Hiroshi Yoshioka. I'm working as director for the Kyoto Biennale 2003. I first became involved in the activities at the Kyoto Art Center when it had been established for one and a half years. Actually this building was formally a building for a primary school and it was built more than 70 years ago.

The educational aspect about art, not only contemporary art, but art in general is very important everywhere in the world. We have to be careful about the fact that education is not a one-way process, because if we think we are experts of art we can educate people to learn nothing about art this is not good. I think this neutral education between artist and normal people, between critics and people from other disciplines is very important.

This is more an experimental thing, we are allowed to do experimental things and we are allowed to invite young artists who are not famous at all, who are doing something new experimental and we cannot say whether Hiroshi will be successful in 2 years or not. But at least we can show their work and encourage them to follow their line, what they are going to do and so that they show the process not only the finished work. The process, show the process to the people. I think this is one of the most important parts of the educational function of the Kyoto Art Center.

Art is very important because I'm not an expert of art, I'm not a critic, and I'm not a professional curator, I'm a philosopher by my profession. But art is important for me

because art is the closest thing that we have in this world, which can give us a large scale of imagination and very profound possibilities of human imagination.

I think every art has- whether artists like it or not- every art activity has a political aspect, there is no way to get away from this. Of course we know some art and artists who are not exclusively involved in the political view, but even in that case if the artists say Hiroshi does not like politics it is a political decision.

I think in the future we will have more and more volunteer activities as spontaneous networking activities to support artistic attempts, but again it's a neutral process; on the one hand we should have more attempts at co-operative networking but on the other hand the understanding of contemporary art should change because it is still dominated by formalistic ideas, as if art is a kind of confined area.

Hitomi Hasegawa – independent curator, Tokyo

The Japanese art scene, other places and the art world are shifting now. I agree with this. Maybe for 5, 10 or 15 years we have had nice, beautiful and expensive museums all over Japan. They used to spend a lot of money for making those very beautiful, nice museums. But these are just boxes without content. We don't have one good, large-scale museum designed by a suitable famous architect. And there are no good collections, because all the money was spent on these so described 'boxes'. There has been this kind of argument over the years. From the 90s we started to have more independence, more artist's initiatives and organisations, that focused mainly on the project, work, or exhibition itself. I think this change is a work in progress now.

Roger McDonald – AIT Arts Initiative Tokyo

AIT: firstly it stands for Arts Initiative Tokyo. We founded it three years ago as an independent initiative of six curators and art managers who were all in their thirties. So it was quite a young group of people, who were all friends beforehand. We had this idea just a few years before, when thinking of different ways in which we could address the various problems we thought existed in the Japanese art scene. We had all been working in the art scene in some way for maybe five to ten years, so we felt that there were specific issues, which really needed to be addressed or problems, which we felt could be challenged.

So three years ago we started forming an education program, a course like an independent school called MAD. It stands for Making Art Different. We started with education as the core element. It started very small. It was very experimental. We didn't know what the response would be. Actually it was much bigger than we expected. A lot of people applied to take this course, in the first year alone we had 30 to 40 people applying. We now offer a one-year course, which explores the idea of curating contemporary art and culture. Basically the main focus is not arts management, but it's much more like the course at the Royal College of Art in London. It's more like creative curating. And we also offer more introductory courses about contemporary art for an audience. We call it an audience course. We have a course now, which looks at reading critical text. It's called Critical Readers. We have another course for artists who want to learn more about presenting themselves, making a portfolio etc. So all these things are actually things that we felt very strongly were lacking in the official art education in Japanese universities. I mean, I teach. I'm often a guest lecturer in these universities. I must say the structure still follows that of the 19th Century. You know Ecole de Beaux Arts, this kind of system. To get into many art schools you must still do plaster drawings, lots of examinations, technical examinations. When you go inside, the teachers' average age is maybe 60 and above. So there is very little knowledge about contemporary art and critical theory, or how to talk about contemporary issues. We really felt those many, many things we could actually offer as a kind of course. And that's what we're trying to do. So this has been going for three years.

AIT itself came up with this education course and because some of us are curators, some of us are in arts management and some are more interested in writing and publishing. So there are six of us operating as a collective and then AIT basically took the decision to be a non-profit organisation from quite early on. We had big debates and discussions amongst ourselves. Why should we become an NPO? Maybe we should just be a small company, it could be better? Because in Japan there are no real legal benefits at the if you become a non-profit organisation. There are no tax breaks. We thought, is this really what we should be doing? But we thought very deeply about it and in the end we thought it is very important that we try to commit ourselves to a more public type of framework. Something not just like a business, something which we were all very interested in. And also I think in many ways, even though there is no financial or tax benefit, actually in terms of social status in Japan there is a benefit to being a non-profit organisation. So for these reasons we officially became an NPO one year ago. So you have to go through the process.

AIT continues this educational program as one of its main core programs. And this is actually creating most of our income. From the beginning we also wanted to try and make a kind of financially sustainable system for ourselves. We didn't want to just keep applying for funding every year. I think this is very dangerous and in Japan anyway, it's almost impossible to keep getting this funding from the government or public sector. In order to survive and keep going you have to have some other source of income, otherwise you just collapse. So this education course is just one of them.

This year we started an artist in residence program in Tokyo. Again, Tokyo had no official artist in residence program until maybe last year or something. So in the last two years there have been three independent artist in residence initiatives emerging in Tokyo, which I think is really a big change. AIT is one of them. Luckily we have a patron who's renting us an apartment very cheaply in the East downtown near Asakusa. So we have this nice apartment and we are now making partnerships with foreign art's organisations. The artist here now is from Sweden, supported by IASPIS. The direction we are taking is to make partnerships with foreign organisations who will pay for artists to come and then from this we get a percentage for being a host to the artist. We are trying to make some income from this.

We also make a bilingual net magazine. An Internet magazine, another area we are identified with. It is very unusual in Japan to have English or bilingual art information, which is been transmitted from Japan. I think there is a real great interest in Japanese art and contemporary culture, when I go to London or wherever. In fact maybe until 3 weeks ago there was no bilingual art magazine. There are a few good web sites, but generally it has been very weak. So this has been another thing we wanted to do, some sort of critical writing in English/Japanese. We also make a whole series of symposiums, artist's talks, curator's talks. Sometimes we collaborate with other big spaces (for 100 people) and then we make symposiums. We operate in a networked way.

The space where we sit in now is where we hold most of the courses, where we have the school and the classes. It's basically a library space for the books, like an archive. And this is also something I think is very special for AIT. We are not an exhibition space. And I think from the beginning we were interested in trying to find a different way of operating. So it's not just displaying things to be seen in exhibitions, but maybe something more discursive around exchange and dialogue. This is one of our characteristics.

Tesuya Ozaki – editor/publisher, Tokyo

I've just published this magazine. This is the first issue. It's basically on the Japanese art scene. This is probably the first Japanese bilingual magazine in Japanese and English. And why did I launch this magazine as bilingual? Because three years ago I launched a cultural web magazine, called Real Tokyo – www.realtokyo.co.jp, which is also bilingual. I thought that there was a need to publish cultural information from Tokyo for people abroad. Because otherwise the Japanese art scene or cultural scene will be totally

isolated from what's going on in the rest of the world. We have to communicate. We have to talk to people. We have to know each other. I'm not a specialist of contemporary art. I used to be a magazine editor. My first aim of publishing this type of magazine or website is to provide people a publication for communication with each other. That's it.