

# OBSERVING THE UNCONSCIOUS (1981)

Idemitsu Mako

THEY SAY THAT women are generally inept at setting up a structure, and I am no exception. Still, my fixation on properly setting up a structure before making work is close to an addiction, and there was an extended period in my life when I couldn't begin to create anything on account of not being able to set up a structure. What allowed me to bid farewell to that period was in part that I had reached an age at which I had to get serious and insist that at that rate I would never be able to complete a single artwork. But it was really because, after living among Westerners, who construct theory on a daily basis, I realized that they're not particularly adept at it, and it can also do a good deal of harm. And from then on my artistic creation has developed as follows.

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ONE DAY, something that could be called a subject suddenly surfaces. Though by "suddenly surfaces" I don't mean it's an issue that is completely divorced from what I usually think about. I've been involved in Jungian psychoanalysis for most of the past decade now and have an interest in the human unconscious. For Jung, the dreams people see while sleeping are the raw material for exploring the world of the unconscious. Although I personally have come to know the world of my own unconscious, I became curious one day about the unconsciousness of others. Yet the unconscious world of dreams is private, and not something for others to go around trying to peek into. In that case, how about the unconsciousness that can be observed through a person's behavior—that is, reading something of that person's unconscious in the gap between their actions and words? One method for this might be to use video's recording and playback functions—

I'm gazing out at the falling snow as I plunge my hand in the cold water to rinse the rice when this thought comes to me. But as I go on thinking about the unconscious of dreams, conscious actions, and the unconscious that can be read in words, the children come home and the day is interrupted. Still, I find myself to be more observant than usual as I watch the boys at play. Parents often glimpse in their children gestures and expressions that resemble those of a grandfather, or a grandmother, or themselves, and I wonder if that's where my own

thoughts are taking me as well.

But once I realize that simply trying to record and watch people talking and moving isn't really much different from an interview, that idea quickly deflates. I abandon all thought about it for a few days. Yet I still have my solo show at Shirakaba Gallery coming up in May, and I have to think about making the work.<sup>1</sup> I suppose there might be some other subject—but I'm quite attached to the idea of observing the unconscious.

Since I'm usually at home doing what is generally called housework—raising my children, feeding them meals—making my own artwork depends on how much housework I can skip in order to gain time and save energy for use in art making. This life of creating works as an artist while doing chores and childrearing as a housewife and mother is a problem of ceaseless struggle within me (in any case, this theme would get made into an artwork in *Shadow*<sup>2</sup>), and at the time it is still a matter of raw internal conflict. And then even though I have my subject—observing the unconscious—just as I don't know how to concretely make it into an artwork, my status as an artist loses ground, and my position as a housewife overpowers me, so I diligently throw myself into doing the housework. For choosing this option is so much easier—because I can fulfill the pretense of satisfying my duties as a housewife simply by moving my body. Nevertheless, once the home is sparkling, the mountain of laundry ironed and put away in its place, and the children have had their fill of mother's love, the artist inside me starts asserting its precarious existence and begins making a commotion. That's when I start thinking about the subject of observing the unconscious again. Having said that, thoughts from the world of the housewife, like “oh, still need to repair that,” float to mind as soon as I try to sit at a desk and think, so I decide to get to work on something, anything concrete. It could be looking for someone to help me make the work, or pulling out equipment I don't access regularly for a cleaning. Once I start cleaning the equipment, I end up doing things like looking in the camera. The video equipment I have is heavy, so I don't lug it around. I usually place it in one spot and move it while using an extension cord. Given that it's been a while since I've peered into the camera, I have to be careful, because if I get excited and move it around too much, I won't have any energy left for thinking about how to realize

<sup>1</sup> [Although this text was published in 1981, Idemitsu is describing the production of a work from 1977, *Women*.]

<sup>2</sup> [Idemitsu made the video *Shadow Part 1* in 1980, and then revisited the theme for *Shadow Part 2* in 1982.]

the main subject.

Before video, I would make work in 16mm film. Since starting video I have used both as media for self-expression, so when some kind of subject comes to mind, I first think about which one—film or video—is most appropriate for representing it. In most cases I already know which one to use, but even knowing that, I still have to do the work of converting the vague things that exist inside me into words and then into something that can be called a subject.

This is true of this act of observing the unconscious as well. By the time the words *document* and *observe* appeared, I already had the idea of making the piece in video. Yet when doubts about making it as a video work crop up, and my thoughts get bogged down, I start to think “well, what if I do try it in film?” With film, the screen is larger and has a stronger appeal as an image, so it is visually richer even when one is observing a single person. And I start thinking about other advantages of film, like how it’s suited to observation, since the dark makes it easier to focus on the screen compared to viewing something in a bright place, as with video. Then it occurs to me that, however things might have been before the age of video, now that we have the medium of video, we must work in video. Video’s defining characteristic is the capacity to record and playback. When you’ve thought of a subject that fits perfectly with video, there’s no way you would now go back to film!

At about this point, I head over to the kitchen, leaving behind a piece of paper scrawled with the words “Characteristics of Video” on my desk. Once again, as I do things like washing rice, cutting vegetables, and setting out plates, I try setting those words I had left behind adrift in the space of the kitchen. They move with me from the refrigerator to the sink, the sink to the stovetop, then to the dining table, but I pay them no mind. Because if I were to think about them, I would probably end up greeting the kids, who are coming home shortly, with a scowl, as if little terrors had returned.

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IT MUST BE two or three days later when I realize that, aside from recording and playback, the possibility of viewing the footage through multiple monitors simultaneously is another characteristic of video.

At first I try envisioning a place with two monitors lined up together. Visualizing one kind of image on one monitor, and another kind of image on the other monitor—like a seascape and a mountainscape, for example—I realize both are images of nature, and that is what they have in common. Each monitor could present images with a common theme.

You have a single person whose actions are shown on one monitor. What does the other monitor display? The subject I'm thinking of now is observing the unconscious. What is there that could represent that person's unconscious? What the person is looking at, what they're thinking, what they're most skilled at, what they're weak at, etc.? Hypothesizing about what that person could be looking at, I imagine a group of neighborhood wives standing around chatting as an event she sees through her window. Camera A captures Person C, who is looking at the chatting wives from the window. Simultaneously, Camera B captures what C is looking at: the chatting wives. Cameras A and B move simultaneously. I am the one peering into Camera A, in which case someone else must be peering into Camera B. Not me, but someone else. This introduces another person, a third-party perspective. This is troubling. If the perspective of someone other than the main person C or myself as artist enters the work, then isn't that going to add a third person's unconscious to the unconscious of C and myself? As I ponder the question of whether adding another perspective would entail adding another unconscious, I start roaming about the house. I fold the half-read newspaper and place it on the bundle of papers to be exchanged for tissues, pick up the kids' cast-off shirts and socks, pause to gaze at a bright patch of early spring sunlight. Then I reach the conviction that that perspective would add another unconscious—through the act of gazing. If that's the case, then the perspective should be that of Person C, who is looking at the chatting wives. I will have C show with the camera what she is looking at through the viewfinder. Anyone can operate a video camera. Continually shooting through the lens what one is seeing is the epitome of the world of video.

I will make what she is looking at—things she is looking at because they just happen to be there, like the neighborhood wives—into *what she wants to see*, which includes C's will in a broader sense. I could also consider having her go to the filming site and select what she wants to

see, though that has its limitations. Having her choose from the start what she wants to see would mean that C's unconscious choices will be included along with her conscious ones. The inclusion of that kind of unconscious element as a visual object is just what this observation needs.

In the act of looking through the lens, your decisions about the size of the frame (field of view, space) and the camera's movement (time) come into play. I want to release this, as much as possible, from the conscious control of the person holding the camera, and leave it in a form approaching the side of the unconscious. To that end, it's best to have a beginner who has no leeway to exert control over the camera as they hold it. I also have no doubts about the choice of man or woman; the fundamental subject of my video work is women's issues. In that case, however, a woman from what kind of field? Housewife, career woman, student, office lady, artist? And about what age? I don't hold any doubts here, either. The women I am most interested in right now are the young women involved in the women's liberation movement. Their conscious world is likely quite developed, or at the very least they have consciously decided to get involved in the problem of women's liberation. But what is going on in the world of their unconscious?

Once I step away from the process of thinking about subject matter, I am suddenly animated. That's because I can do practical activities like making phone calls, meeting with people, and procuring equipment without trouble. I recall that someone I met previously belongs to a women's group, and I contact her to ask for help. Without even explaining anything about the subject of the work, I simply mention that I'm looking for someone to perform for me, as I want to make a video. She cheerfully consents, and two or three days later I get a phone call that there are a few women who seem like they can help me out, so could I please meet with them and explain the content of the video in more detail.

There's a space just for women in Shinjuku that these women have opened, so I head out to meet them there. It's my first outing in quite a while. As I pass through Meguro, Azabu, and Aoyama on the way from my home to Shinjuku, I'm seized by the thought that I am a suburbanite in the city. Feeling overwhelmed and even bewildered by the energy of the city, I arrive at last at my destination, which is filled with the

energy of young women. Inside the narrow, long shop, there are lots of women looking relaxed. After all the work of coming up with a subject by myself, the atmosphere is almost too vivid for me. I am introduced to four women, but now that I try to explain the contents of the new work to them, I'm surprised to find that the words don't come out. At home, by myself, what I was thinking in my own words was purely for me only, and it starts to seem like it doesn't pass with others. Or perhaps it comes from the feeling that what I'd been considering is at odds with this festive atmosphere. In any case, instead of saying that I want them to look at what they want to see through the camera, I say that I want them to capture what they want to shoot with the camera, without ever realizing I was phrasing it in those terms.

When I ask "Have you ever used a video camera?" all four say "No." So then I think we will start the shoot from teaching them how to use video. I will demonstrate how to use video, hand over the camera, and then have them start shooting while I film them. As I watch and listen to each of the four women's reactions—all their gestures, expressions, and different opinions—I start to consider dividing the four into two groups of two to exhibit them in a form that compares them two by two. There will be four monitors: two of them to show the women shooting, and the other two to show what the women are shooting. Compare isn't really the right word, but what I'm getting at is a method of using one thing to understand another—having another person appear in order to depict someone else—so two people will have leading roles. I can conceive of doing this not just with two people, but with three, four, or any number of people, though with each additional person, the number of monitors increases twofold, the act of viewing gets busier, and the focus ends up blurring. Wouldn't it just turn into a consideration of the comings and goings of the gaze between the many monitors?

These thoughts flit about my head as I talk with the four women, but in any case, I ask the women to think about what they want to shoot, and prepare their own necessities accordingly. There isn't much time before my solo exhibition, so we fix the dates as well. The next day, I arrange for people to help with transporting the equipment. I decide to use what I already have equipment-wise, so just the one black-and-white and one color cameras. I can also imagine borrowing another color camera in place of the black-and-white, but I have the feeling that

the idea for shooting someone who is using one camera with a different camera emerged from my living with the two cameras, so I decide to only use my own.

As far as people to help with the shoot, I need two people to handle the equipment, especially for holding the camera while on the move: one on my side, and one on the woman's side. It's best if these two are acquaintances. That makes everything easier. And they will be men. Later on I will come to realize that even among women there are some whose strength rivals men, but at the time there are no such strong women around me, so as far as carrying equipment goes, only men come to mind. On top of which, I have just had an incident where I gathered several women involved in filmmaking and took them for a drive, but in spite of talking big about making a movie with women only, when we arrived at the destination and got out of the car, every single one of them left her door open. And by this I don't just mean that they forgot to lock the door, but that they actually left the doors themselves wide open. Given that they didn't even pay attention to something as simple as closing the doors of the car they had just ridden in, I was doubtful about what these women would be like in the process of making a film, and lost confidence in Japanese women as film staff.

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WHEN IT COMES to shooting video, I worry about different things than when I work with film. Namely, I worry about when trouble might occur with the equipment. Even when it's my own equipment, something will go wrong on the way from home to the location. Although I've repeated that experience many times, I can never figure out what the cause of the video trouble is. In the first place, I don't really have any interest in mechanics, and even though I've put a lot of effort into trying to take an interest in it, I give up all hope the moment the situation becomes the slightest bit complicated. Effort requires energy, and if I put all my effort into the equipment first, I'll use up all my energy on that, and will be completely exhausted by the start of shooting. I've often had to do things like change the location due to equipment trouble.

So it goes for Ms. Neko, one of the four women in the first shoot.<sup>3</sup> She has a desire to shoot at Shinjuku Imperial Gardens, so we head

3 [The names of the three women mentioned in this text all evoke other images, yet they also follow conventions of Japanese feminine names (often ending in "ko"). The first two, Ms. Neko and Ms. Usako, bring animals to mind, specifically *neko* (cat or kitty) and *usagi* (rabbit or bunny). With the use of "ko" in the last syllable of each name, specifically represented in "Usako" with the character for "child," the names are rendered with an air of cuteness. The *tenko* of Ms. Tenko, meaning "thunder," uses a different character for the final syllable that lends it a more powerful impression, but retains a link to the other women's names through the sound "ko." It should be noted, however, that while the names of these participants do appear to be allusive, in the videos themselves they are presented as real names (alongside family names), rather than pseudonyms. As such, they have been rendered in the same way as other proper names, transliterated rather than translated.]

out there. To begin with, at the entrance there is a question with the guard about whether we have a shooting permit and such, and when we finally get inside, the video deck won't work. There's a problem with the connection between the battery and the deck, but even the video expert who has come along to lend a hand isn't able to fix it, so in the end we have to change to a location where we can connect to an AC power supply. What Ms. Neko wanted to shoot was not the garden or the events in it, but rather a person she chose, and since she just happened to choose the garden as a location because it is an open space, moving someplace else probably doesn't make a substantial difference. But even so, given that the subject of this work is observing the unconscious, I think that moving around with the spatial constraint of needing to draw AC power versus freely moving in a wide, open garden inevitably has a subtle effect.

After Ms. Neko, trouble crops up again at Ms. Usako's shoot when something goes wrong with the black-and-white camera's extension cord. But since we don't use the extension cord, we're able to finish up with just a minor inconvenience: the figure of the person holding the tape deck occasionally protrudes from behind Ms. Usako in the scenes I shoot of her. In any case, everyone who is working on this piece with me is doing so without compensation, and since they all have their own lives too, there is no chance of rescheduling the shoot.

Two monitors, four monitors; I can think of various arrangements, but what I have on hand at home are two monitors and two video decks. First I start by trying to arrange the images of Ms. Usako next to the footage she shot on the two monitors. One thing the four women have in common is that the movements of the handheld camera are quite composed for all of them. They don't move the camera back and forth or zoom in and out, as many beginners do. In contrast, my own camera is the one that seems to jolt around. I don't usually touch the camera, and on the rare occasions that I do try to use it, I am reminded that I've forgotten how to even operate it. After someone returns equipment that they've borrowed from me, I'll leave it sitting in the entryway for months until the next time I use it. I've ruined plenty of batteries that way.

The relationship between the two sets of images—the figure of Ms. Usako shooting video and the footage she shot—is really interesting. Her relaxed air as she holds the camera as if it were the nozzle at the

end of a hose; her lips gradually breaking into a smile as she peers into the lens and sees what is being depicted; the scene she captures of a collection of various rabbit toys, along with her friend who is playing with them. The water balloon the friend has inflated flies off to enter the screen showing Ms. Usako. The water balloon flying from one monitor to the other makes for an entertaining, idyllic atmosphere. My older son, who has been looking on with a bored expression, shouts out “Hey, fun!” This is where I find myself tearing up. Even though they aren’t relevant to the subject, when he enjoys these visually playful passages, I end up wanting just those kinds of scenes.

Shifting from thinking about these two images to focus on Ms. Usako only, I start to wonder if this method might be too simplistic for the quite complex subject of observing the unconscious. Then I proceed to put on the tapes of Ms. Neko. I try mentally juxtaposing Ms. Usako’s images with the images I am now watching of Ms. Neko. Both of them go by the names of animals—namely, rabbit and cat—and their distinctions in appearance, as well as the different filmic objects, spaces, and times they have chosen, get entwined with each other through their opposition. If these videos were screened on four monitors in actuality, so that one could read the unconscious of both women together, it would generate a psychological space between the viewer and the monitors. Since the viewer will project their thinking/unconscious onto the images on the monitors, it’s more interesting for those images to be heterogeneous. But I don’t think it will dissipate the focus much to have two people as the main characters being observed.

Shortly after the end of the shoot for the fourth woman, Ms. Tenko, I’m driving along the Daisan Keihin Road heading home from the location in Kohoku<sup>4</sup> when I recall Ms. Tenko’s words of surprise as she first peered into the video camera: “Wow, so you can immediately see what you shot, just like that!” This is quite common and nothing special in itself, but her reaction was so unusual and fresh that it has me thinking something powerful might happen if I were to interview her and capture her words and expressions. In truth, all I have captured is footage of the women holding the camera and shooting video, and I feel there is something weak, insufficient, powerless, and lacking force in this. Of course, my own camerawork has its deficiencies too, but in any case, given that using a video camera for the first time is integral

4 [A ward in Yokohama, near Kawasaki City.]

to the subject of the work, I can't redo the shoots. I decide to push the work further by adding something to the existing footage. How about interviewing them with the camera aimed at them from straight on? I'll try shooting an interview with Ms. Tenko as soon as I get home. There are times when this kind of idea that spontaneously floats up goes well, but this time it's too shallow. I haven't done any preparation for my questions, so the content ends up being boring, and under the bright lights Ms. Tenko completely shrivels up. As she drinks her iced coffee, the sweating Ms. Tenko says, "So it's already iced coffee season." It's just about to be May. There is barely any time left until my solo show. And then the extended holidays are waiting at the start of the month.<sup>5</sup> A break at the kids' school means my art practice must go on break too.

No matter how you try to rush it, when something's no good, it's just no good. Besides, because of all the shoots and this and that, I haven't been giving the kids enough attention, which is showing up in their attitudes at school. I get a warning phone call from the teachers.

I regretfully think that if I had only set up a proper structure before making the work, it probably wouldn't have turned out this way, but it can't really be helped, as this is the method for advancing my thoughts that best suits me. I suppress my irritation and meet the kids with a beaming smile. I see the two faces appearing side-by-side on two monitors in my mind while only half-hearing what the boys have to say. The kids are quick to sense that, and give up, realizing that talking to mom is useless.

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There are two people—with me seated across from them. I have an atrium-like living room at home, so I can look down on it from the second-story balcony. Two children and their mother are sitting in the corner of the living room. If someone were to look down on this scene from above, what would they think? What kind of mother am I playing with my back turned toward them? Aren't our backsides eerie simply on account of our not being able to see them ourselves, and because they are beyond reach of our conscious control? Looking from behind someone . . . looking at the figures of the four women from behind . . . in that case, why not look at what they're doing from behind? Walking,

<sup>5</sup> [A reference to Golden Week, when several national holidays fall within the span of a week in late April and early May. Many people take the entire week off in order to travel. It is known as one of the busiest travel seasons of the year, and many schools and childcare services close for the full week as well.]

talking, eating, doing something enjoyable—I can think of many scenarios. Rather than being perceived as unrelated to the work, I want it to be perceived as an extension of the subject. The act of observing or viewing the unconscious is the main parameter. In which case, what about the act of the women viewing both the things they captured on video and themselves shooting the footage? The plan I have in mind for the gallery installation is a scene with four monitors screening the images of the two women and what they each recorded, then all four women view this. So I will set up four monitors, then try capturing the figures of the four women lined up in front of the monitors from behind. The living room at home is perfect for shooting that.

I take a look down from the second-floor balcony. I try imagining four monitors arranged like so and four people lined up in turn. The space in front of where the four monitors will be lined up looks larger than I thought, and the figures of the people will be overwhelmed by the monitors. Monitors have more imagistic power than people's backs, so a larger crowd would be better—in which case, what about using the women who served as the objects of the women's footage, as well as Ms. Kayo who introduced everyone in her role as coordinator? If there were time, I might push this idea further until another idea emerges. But I don't have time, plus I have my doubts that pushing it further would necessarily lead to a better idea. In my experience, there are also cases where overthinking ends up destroying the premise of the work. I decide intuitively when it seems to have reached a good stopping point. This stance of valuing intuition is something I learned by living in American society, which has revealed the limits in the prioritization of logic over intuition. Gathering equipment and safely operating that equipment—these must also be thought of as occupying a significant part of the creative process for video. For the next shoot I will gather two monitors and three tape decks, so I better build enough stamina to carry a U-matic tape deck.

One day during the May holidays, everyone comes over. I have sent the kids to their friends' houses. But since I have to wrap the shoot before they return home, I'm just about praying for the equipment and machines to work smoothly for me. One, two, three, four: I relax once the videos appear on all four monitors. Four tape decks for four monitors plus a camera and tape deck up above makes for a

luxurious feeling. The six women who are lined up looking closely at the monitors react enthusiastically to what they see. The humans have their backs turned while the machines are facing the camera. After shooting the part for the remaining two the same way, I play back the tape for everyone to see. I sit at one end of the women, who sit in the same formation as before. I shoot this situation again under the same conditions as before. This is a spontaneous occurrence, and not part of the plan. Because as I was watching the repetition of the act of *viewing* with the monitors and women lined up in an almost circular formation, I had the thought that my being seen, as its maker, would complete the work. And now the work is complete.

Shirakaba Gallery is an L-shaped and quite narrow space. If I set up six tape decks and monitors there, it will be packed as soon as people enter. I decide to consolidate all the tape decks in the back, and place the monitors against the wall at the end of the entryway. How to display the six monitors? I'll place four monitors in the middle showing the videos of the two women and what they shot, respectively, and on either side place the monitors with the videos of everyone watching together. Having six monitors lined up in a row could get distracting, so the four central monitors will be stacked in sets of two. Considering that the human gaze usually moves from right to left, I place the scenes of the women shooting video on the right and the images they captured on the left. This means the monitors with the scenes of the women shooting video are stacked one on top of the other, and likewise for the monitors featuring the images the women shot. And then I put the first scene of everyone watching together on the far right, with the second scene that includes me viewing the first tape on the far left. This placement also relies on the movement of the gaze from right to left, but since in Jungian psychology the right is a symbol for the conscious and the left a symbol for the unconscious, I want the last view of this work on the subject of observing the unconscious to end on the side of the unconscious.

I was assuming I would be using monitors of all the same size when I thought of this installation plan, but ultimately, since the support I expected from Sony doesn't come through, I have to scramble to ask for monitors from here and there, and end up with an array of monitors of varying sizes. Even so, the monitors I borrow from Ms. Nakaya and the

monitors I borrow from my mother's place are, by happy chance, the same make, and I am able to stack the two pairs on top of each other. So the two upper and lower monitors are each the same, with just those on either side being different sizes, and there is no need to change the installation plan.

It seems this is how my artmaking progresses, with my thinking developing alongside taking concrete action. And I think *this is the only way*.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [Although Idemitsu does not explicitly state it in this text, her writing style reveals her investment in early ideas of video in Japan that emphasized video as process rather than product. For the artists of the 1970s collective Video Hiroba, a group that Idemitsu occasionally exhibited with (Nakaya Fujiko, mentioned in this text, was a central member of the group), video as process was primarily focused on video as communication, and specifically a two-way form of communication that would combat the unilateral structure of broadcast-style mass media. In this text, however, Idemitsu shifts the emphasis of process away from *communication* and toward *thinking*. Her process involves thinking through the process of making video, and crucially her subject of investigation is the unconscious, a site of difficult-to-reach thought. Her leap from communication to cognition appears to be influenced by her interest in Jung's ideas on the unconscious, in particular his idea of a collective unconscious that allows cognition to exceed the individual. Yet she brings this into conversation with unstated structures of gender relations to articulate a complex vision of video's potential as a tool for feminist sociopsychological investigation.]

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