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THE CULTURE OF MEDIA ART

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Yoshioka Hiroshi

I HAVE BEEN ASKED to write about media art for this special issue [of *Bijutsu Forum* 21] titled "The History and Present State of Postwar Japanese Art."[1] The first questions that come to mind are what range of work and activity should be called media art, how far back the origins of media art can be traced, and how to define the relationship between art history and media art. To address these issues concretely, I would also need to provide an overview of the state of media art today by introducing international festivals such as Ars Electronica, Transmediale, and International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA), research and educational institutes like Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe (ZKM), and online organizations such as Rhizome (http://rhizome.org).

Unfortunately, I cannot produce such an overview in the limited time I have. It is true that I have been involved in media art for more than a decade, though not so much as a researcher but rather through practical aspects such as teaching and promotion. This is why, in this essay, I will attempt to propose some ideas by introducing projects and developments in media art in which I have been directly involved. One is my work teaching and promoting media art at the Institute of Advanced Media Arts and Sciences / Gifu Prefectural International Academy of Media Arts and Science (IAMAS),[2] and the other is my role in organizing an international conference called the International Convention on Manga, Animation, Game and Media Art.

But first, a brief discussion of the relationship between media art and fine art is in order.

Since the 1990s, media art[3] does appear to have been treated increasingly within the context of contemporary art. It is a matter of fact that media art is now regularly exhibited in art museums. In the past, resistance against exhibiting media art as artwork could be seen in claims that media art was not art but rather a mere presentation of technology, but today such views are rarely expressed (not that they have gone away). This suggests that, at least on an institutional level, media art has been established and accepted within the realm of fine art. But then, something that was until just recently not accepted in art museums becoming a common presence is not a situation unique to media art. The same can be said for entertainment culture like manga, animation, and video games.[4]

1 [This essay appears in vol. 30 of *Bijutsu Forum* 21 published in November 2014.]

2 [As the author explains in the "From the activities of IAMAS" section, IAMAS was an acronym for two institutions that shared the same facilities, namely Gifu Prefectural International Academy of Media Arts and Sciences, established in 1996, and Institute of Advanced Media Arts and Sciences, established in 2001. The former was closed in 2011, but IAMAS continues to be a focal point for media art in Japan and beyond.]

3 That said, I probably do need to provide at least a preliminary explanation of what is meant by "media art," but for now, think of it as artworks and artistic activities to which technology (chiefly digital information technology) is central. Whether or not a computer is actually used in order to make the work is not a fundamental issue.

4 The fact that works that are not "fine art" are now exhibited in art museums means, of course, that museums have changed, including economic and managerial factors. Museum visitors have also grown used to this situation. Moreover, the fact is that no one seriously questions anymore whether something is or is not art—even if someone did, no one would listen to them—and this is not limited to Japan.

But what sets media art apart from these other categories is the word "art" attached to it. What exactly is the "art" in "media art"? I do not mean to get into a deep discussion of art theory, but rather to ask a very simple question. Art refers to what we call "*geijutsu*"[5] or "fine art," but it also refers more broadly to "technology," "technique," and "skill." The question is, which of these two definitions is more significant in the way "media art" is conceived of?

If we take it to be the former, media art can be understood as a new development within fine art. In other words, media art refers to art made using new forms of media enabled by video and digital technology (in English, the term "new media art" is also common), as opposed to more traditional media. Oil paint was once a new medium, and acrylic paint emerged in the twentieth century. Video and digital media are the latest in this progression, and media art is that which actively engages with them. This is certainly how media art appears when viewed from "inside" fine art. Among media artists too, there are many who produce their works with a strong sense that they are a form of fine art.

But that is not all there is to it. Surely, media art is more expansive than what can be accounted for when seen only as a new trend within contemporary art. To understand this, the "art" of media art must be interpreted not as fine art but in the broader sense of the word. Just as fine art is one culture, so too is media art. Each of these cultures presents differing perspectives. Contained in the "culture of media art" is the view that human aesthetic perception and expressive activities are intimately connected to the state of science and technology. To call it "technological determinism" would be an extreme position, but at the very least, in the "culture of media art," there is a shared attitude against underestimating technology's impact on humans, or to put it another way, a skepticism toward the humanist belief that humans are humans, no matter how technology changes.

By considering media art as a culture alongside that of fine art, it becomes possible to position fine art within the history of media art, just as we can talk about the development of media art within the history of contemporary art, and in fact, this is the direction media art theory seems to be moving in.[6] Viewed in this light, developments such as the exhibition of media art in traditional art museums, and the active

5 [Geijutsu 芸術 is a term that refers to the arts in general, as opposed to bijutsu 美術, which has been translated as "fine art" throughout the text, taking cue from the author's own coupling of the katakana transliteration of fine art with *bijutsu*. Both terms were neologism of the Meiji period (1868-1912) and the result of an effort to find corresponding terms to Western concepts such as art or the German *kunst*, which were being introduced at this time. At the origin of those terms, therefore, lies a difficulty to translate concepts and categories, which has led to confusions that the author explores later in the text.]

6 For example, since 2002 Oliver Grau has organized international conferences with the aim of constructing an interdisciplinary "history of media art." The issues raised at these conferences go beyond simply describing the history of media art as a new area of culture, attempting instead to reevaluate culture in its entirety, including fine art, from the perspective of media art (Oliver Grau, *MediaArtHistories*, Cambridge: MIT Press/Leonardo Books, 2007). Additionally, the concept of "media archeology" proposed by Erkki Huhtamo attempts to recount the cultural prehistory leading to the media art of today from a perspective entirely different from that of fine art or modernism.

engagement with media art seen at new cultural institutions like NTT Intercommunication Center (ICC), Tokyo (1995-), Miraikan: The National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation, Tokyo (2001-), Sendai Mediatheque (SMT, 2001-), Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media (YCAM, 2003-), and the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa (2004-) can be taken as signs that this "culture of media art" has been established within Japan over the last ten-odd years.

Nonetheless, media art is still in its infancy and its identity as a culture has yet to be fully formed. The meaning of "media art" in Japanese[7] appears unstable as compared to in English, where the terms "media art(s)" and "new media art(s)" seem relatively fixed now. It is not uncommon to hear art students today describe "media art" as a temporary trend from the 1990s to the early 2000s and question the need to go out of the way to call something "media art" as opposed to simply "art," when the use of computers in art making has become so common. There is no denying that, if we only consider the Japanese word "media art," it has lost the impact and attraction it once had. But I believe this is a temporary and superficial phenomenon. What the term "media art" points to is the fact that we are living at the beginning of a seismic shift in the history of art and culture.

7 [The Japanese term for "media art" is a direct katakana transliteration of the English word (メディアアート).]

FROM THE ACTIVITIES OF IAMAS

I SPENT ROUGHLY seven years from 2000 to 2006 working at a school called IAMAS in Ogaki City, Gifu Prefecture, where I remain a part-time lecturer to this day. My practical involvement in media art is made up

primarily of my experiences with the students, colleagues, graduates, and artists in residence whom I met through my position at IAMAS, as well as of activities with institutions like ICC, SMT, YCAM, and Ars Electronica Center in Linz, Austria, which have deep ties to IAMAS in various ways. IAMAS is, without a doubt, one of the focal points of Japan's "culture of media art."

IAMAS was founded in 1996 as a vocational school under the name Gifu Prefectural International Academy for Media Arts and Sciences. Sakane Itsuo (1930-), the president of IAMAS at the time of its founding, had been deeply interested in the interdisciplinarity between art, science, and technology since the 1960s, researching and reporting on it as a journalist for *Asahi Shimbun* until retirement, after which he began to teach at Keio University in the Faculty of Environment and Information Studies. Sakane's passion for media art can be credited with greatly shifting the prefectural school's founding philosophy from its original focus on the development of IT professionals. Sakane did not hold in equal regard all the cultural phenomena we call media art today—he had an undeniably strong taste for "interactive art," which I will discuss later—but what matters is that he envisioned media art not as one category of art but rather as a new culture that would replace art as we knew it. To put it in the terms that I have been using here, he held an earnest belief in the "culture of media art."

In 1995, one year ahead of the opening of IAMAS, the first World Forum for Media Art and Culture, organized by Gifu Prefecture, was held at Suitopia Center in Ogaki City. The forum strongly reflected Sakane's vision of a "new art in the multimedia age." Its central function was an exhibition titled The Interaction. As the name suggests, the exhibition focused within media art on "interactive art." Interactive art refers to artworks that react and respond to some kind of action from the viewer (voice, movement, touch, etc.), particularly real-time responses that utilize digital information technology. The artists invited to participate in the first *The Interaction* exhibition were Jeffrey Shaw (1944-), Agnes Hegedüs (1964-), Michael Naimark, Luc Courchesne (1952-), Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, Jean-Louis Boissier (1945-), Ed Tannenbaum (1953-), David Rokeby (1960-), Jim Campbell (1956-), and Iwai Toshio (1962-), all leading media artists from the United States, Europe, and Japan.[8] Their engagement with IAMAS continued through

8 [Mistakes in the spelling of artist names and birth years have been corrected in this translation.]

special lectures and residencies, and in the case of Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau, as full-time faculty.[9]

It was April 2000 when I joined IAMAS, and the following year, the graduate school called the Institute of Advanced Media Arts and Sciences opened its doors. It was an unusual environment where a vocational school and a graduate university shared a name, IAMAS, and the same physical space for teaching and research, but I think of this time as a kind of turning point for media art in Japan. Students no longer reacted much to the word "media art." Or if they did, it was an unenthusiastic and slightly cynical response. I think this was a very significant change.

What gave media art its momentum until the 1990s was a genuine wonder at the new perceptions and experiences made possible by rapidly developing digital technologies. The aesthetic core of media art was this wonder itself; whatever was expressed through this technology was not as important. But when media art begins to be understood and exhibited simply as artwork, it becomes harder to see the context of its relationship to technology. For example, in the case of interactive art, what mattered was not that a particular interaction took place between viewer and artwork, but rather that the interaction was presented as something amazing achieved for the first time. So it goes without saying that even if technological advancements made it possible to create a similar effect more simply and with higher quality, there would be nothing interesting about that as media art.

A similar change can be seen when considering artistic production. When an effect that would have once required programming, other high-level technical expertise, and many hours of trial and error becomes, in just a few years, attainable with speed and ease, the meaning of that same effect is completely altered. Wonder becomes boredom. Despite its small scale of just 100 students, IAMAS is equipped with a nap room and an environment where it is possible to work all hours of the day and night. This is because, at the time of its opening, creating cutting-edge media art required running high-end desktop computers for long periods of time. But in just a few years, it became possible to run the same operation from home on a laptop. When media art is taken as a pre-existing category of fine art without an awareness of the way technological progress has changed the

9 The contents of the first to the fourth The Interaction exhibitions are recorded in catalogs published by the World Forum for Media and Culture Executive Committee (the first exhibition catalog was published by the preparatory office for the establishment of IAMAS).

meaning of producing such works, the drive to create them through a fundamental engagement with technology fades.

The 2000s saw a change in the exhibition of media art too. The Interaction exhibition mentioned above continued to be held every other year, in 1997, 1999, and 2001, each time showcasing pioneering interactive art primarily from the Western world in the format of an art exhibition. But in the fiscal year 2003 (February 2004), the World Forum for Media Art and Culture was renamed the Ogaki Biennale and its format changed, with exhibitions and events to be held in various locations throughout the city. The framework centered around interactive art was dropped, and faculty, students, and graduates joined the invited artists as exhibitors.

These changes in format were undoubtedly due in part to a major reduction of the event's budget, but there were also clear signs that the field of media art was beginning to search for its identity, particularly in relation to the local community. It was around this time that I took a concurrent appointment as the director of the Center for Media Culture, a research center affiliated with IAMAS, and took charge of the Ogaki Biennale. I organized the Biennale's second edition with a focus on media art in Asia, calling it *Janken: The Power of Chance* (2006).[10] Gunalan Nadarajan, a media art researcher and curator from Singapore, joined as program director, and several artists, mostly from East Asia, were invited to show their work alongside that of IAMAS affiliates in locations throughout Ogaki City. Artists Zulkifle Mahmod (1975-) from Singapore, Tad Ermitaño (1964-) from the Philippines, Venzha Christ (1975-) from Indonesia, Raqs Media Collective from India, and Hyojung Seo (1972-) from South Korea exhibited their work at historic sites including a closed branch of the Jūroku Bank, the Butoku-den, a former martial arts hall now used as a gymnasium, and the Takeshima Kaikan located at the remains of the Honjin building of Ogaki-Shuku (Fig. 1, 2).[11]

This project highlighted media art in Asia, but it was not necessarily the geographic origin of the participating artists that was the most significant difference between this exhibition and previous ones. This exhibition focused not on the wonder of new experiences made possible by technology, but rather on the possibility of "hacking" the technology deeply embedded into our society and daily lives and using technology as the medium to explore the hidden meanings held

10 [*Janken* is the Japanese equivalent of the game Rock Paper Scissors.]

11 Information about exhibited artworks, the concept, and symposium details are included in the catalog *Ogaki Biennale 2006* (IAMAS, 2007). [Available here as of June 25, 2022: https://www.iamas.ac.jp/iamasbooks/event/ogaki-biennale-2006/.]

within places and regions. The decision to organize such an exhibition reflected the shared understanding that the image of the "cutting-edge" that had dominated media art until the 1990s was no longer exciting. This is also why we chose an image of cyclicality with Rock Paper Scissors as the exhibition theme, instead of a sense of linear progress upholding the notion of "cutting-edge."

FROM THE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION ON MANGA, ANIMATION, GAME AND MEDIA ART

"MEDIA ART" IS OF course a borrowed term, and its definition in Japanese does not fully correspond to the English. "Media art" in English is broad, encompassing video art, video games, and even bio art which uses bioengineering. In Japanese, "media art" does not include these genres because, as I discussed earlier, the word took on a life of its own before its relationship to "art" could be considered adequately. The following report on my work related to "*media geijutsu*"[12] will highlight the confusion surrounding the word "media art" in the Japanese language.

From 2011 until 2013, I spent three years as the chair of the International Convention on Manga, Animation, Game and Media Art, helping to plan and run this international conference.[13] The conference was a project related to the Japan Media Arts Festival [*Bunkacho media geijutsu-sai* in Japanese], which has been held by the Agency for Cultural Affairs since 1997, and was designed as a place to discuss the new artistic category *media geijutsu*, to which artworks shown at the festival belonged. Japan Media Arts Festival today comprises

12 [A word composed of the transliteration of "media" メディアand the aforementioned term for the arts in general, geijutsu 芸術, which the author goes on to discuss in the following paragraphs.]

13 A report on the Third International Convention on Manga, Animation, Game and Media Arts is available as a PDF at the following link: http://www.bunka.go.jp/geijutsu_bunka/04media_geijutsusai/. [The link provided in the original appears broken, but the PDF can be accessed here as of June 25, 2022: http://archive.j-mediaarts.jp/data/related/promotion/docs/h24_hokokusyo.pdf.]

four categories: art (media art), manga, animation (anime), and entertainment (video games). The idea is that the word *media geijutsu* (translated as "media arts" in English) encompasses all these genres.

At first, I was perplexed by the word *media geijutsu*. I did not see the need to group media art, manga, anime, and games together under this term, and furthermore, since the English word "media arts" does not have the same connotations, I thought doing so would only invite more confusion. The neologism felt like a desperate attempt to bring these various forms of popular expression, celebrated globally in recent years but difficult to include in traditional *geijutsu-sai* [art festival], into the realm of geijutsu. On the other hand, *media geijutsu* is already a term defined by law. The Basic Law on Art and Culture, issued in 2001, designates *media geijutsu* as "movies, manga, animation, and other artworks that use computers and/or any other electronic devices."[14] Though this definition does not align completely with the kinds of works included in the Japan Media Arts Festival as "*media geijutsu*," the search for an expanded concept of art within contemporary culture, technology, and the environment is evident.

I decided to come up with a theme for the convention that would encompass this conceptual confusion. The first conference, held in February 2011, was called "The Locality and Universality of *Media Geijutsu*: Beyond 'Cool Japan.'"[15] Seven non-Japanese speakers partook in the conference with simultaneous interpreting between Japanese and English, where we deliberately chose not to translate *media geijutsu* as "media arts" in English, but instead to leave it as *geijutsu*. We explained that geijutsu is different from "art" and "fine art," and that it is a word deeply associated with ideas of cultural value, legitimacy, and spiritual depth. The reason behind this was not to emphasize the peculiarities of the Japanese language, but rather to present the confusion contained in the term *media geijutsu* (since the distinction between *media geijutsu* and "media art" does not exist in English, translating *media geijutsu* as "media arts" would result in the Japanese term "media art" becoming a subgenre of the English category of "media arts") and to show that this confusion originates in the confusion in which geijutsu itself became entangled during Japan's modernization.[16] This is by no means a situation limited to Japan and it has been experienced to some extent, large or small, by any culture that

14 "Artworks that use computers and/or any other electronic devices" is a vague definition of media art considering that today, much artistic production involves the use of a computer or other electronic device in some capacity. For the full text of the law [in Japanese], see the following link: http://www.bunka.go.jp/bunka_gyousei/kihonhou/kihonhou.html [The link provided in the original appears broken, but the text can be accessed here as of June 25, 2022: https://elaws.e-gov.go.jp/document?lawid=413AC1000000148. The English translation, which varies, has been taken by *Media Arts Database*, a website run by the Agency of Cultural Affairs: https://mediaarts-db.bunka.go.jp/about?lang=en&.]

15 This subtitle was added because the Japan Media Arts Festival's inclusion of the fields of manga, animation, and games, could have led to the misunderstanding that the convention was part of the Cool Japan measures promoted by the Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Cabinet. However, this is not meant as a rejection of "Cool Japan," but it is rather based on the belief that for the international promotion of Japanese culture to be sustainable, an industrial strategy alone is insufficient, and that there must be a perspective emphasizing long-term cultural development.

16 [See note 4 above.]

embraced the Western model of modern fine art.

People may think that because both technology and fine art are universal, contemporary art and media art are global and thus relatively independent of locality and history. But the reality is the opposite; it is precisely because fine art and technology are the same that the specific social and historical conditions in which they are situated, and the confusion surrounding these conditions, become apparent. I believe, however, that the hope of art lies exactly in this process of making its own conditions visible.

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