

Tomohiro Okada

# Mediadrive

after ICT penetration of the Tokyo environment

Given that ICT (Information and Communication Technology) penetration has reached high levels in Japan, what is happening in Tokyo? In a country renowned for bringing new ICT products developed through emerging technologies to the world, how is art contributing to the new media culture? I talked to innovative artists, curators, producers and key-persons in order to analyze some answers to these questions.

## Mediadrive—New style by artists using ICT

**Butoh, Dance, VJ, Techno, Mediadrive**  
Tetsu TAVATA (cell/66b)

It's a quiet day in Minami-aoyama, an epicenter of youth culture in Tokyo. A few people are training at Co:exist, an area situated in a former consulate house redesigned as a culture complex. They are members of cell/66b ([www.vision.co.jp/66b/](http://www.vision.co.jp/66b/)), a performing arts and visual group influenced by butoh, contemporary dance and martial arts. Their costumes are designed by 3D computer graphics; they use techno music and visuals effects created by a real-time VJ (visual jockey). Tetsu, who is a producer, stage and costume designer, as well as VJ of cell/66b, defines the performance style as "mediadrive." A fusion of performance, sound and computerized visual effects are 'driven' live to evoke feelings

in both performers and audiences. Tetsu is also a leader in the VJ movement, a booming visual art style in Tokyo.

Tetsu is a visual specialist using computer graphics for broader stage acts ranging from performing arts through to club music. When working as a film technician at a butoh studio, he was attracted by the world of butoh and began training. Through this experience he met artists in the performing arts world involved in areas such as dance, ballet, and theatre, and began contributing computer-based visual effects to those people who had previously never had any idea about using them. This resulted in a challenging new form of performing arts with digital effects in the formulation of cell/66b. They are experimenting with new media expressions, not only in terms of theatrical effects, but also through real-time tele-presence performances between Australia and Japan.



Tetsu TAVATA



Tetsu TAVATA

VJs have been a common sight on the Tokyo club scene since the late 1980's. Up until a few years ago however, VJs only showed and mixed pre-produced works by video/computer graphics artists. After the mid 1990's, personal computers became high quality visual processing units. Some VJs began using real-time visual generating software in live performances and were challenged to develop their own software tools. Since 1998, Tetsu has produced a series of event gatherings for tool developers and digital creators under the name of Project Real. This series enabled the evaluation of work while providing opportunities for creators seeking possible partners in the realization of projects. The term VJ is beginning to define one of the new forms of technology art in Japan.

VJs have penetrated deeply into the Tokyo club music scene. Big clubs now erect VJ booths. VJs are creating original images and effects and are becoming more and more of an audience attraction. Tetsu uses C.V.A. ([www.genemagic.com/](http://www.genemagic.com/)) a software programme for which he is a kind of crash-pilot. C.V.A. is a real-time visual effect using an originally developed software graphic engine.

### Artists in mobile field qpd

From an artist's point of view, what is being done in the "hot spot" field of mobile telephony? I interviewed qpd (USHIRO Kanae and MORIMOTO Takashi) who are exploring their artistic talents in the web and mobile contents business scenes. They are presently contributing to a leading Japanese web magazine, "Web GENDAI" (<http://kodansha.cplaza.ne.jp/>). They have created java based fun stuff "Sushi Fortune Telling" for the magazine and it has earned them a wide repute. While making this into a mobile java version, they also produced "Finger Sumo Game." The charming and unique pair talked about art and creativity.

OKADA: I heard the two of you are from quite different backgrounds.

MORIMOTO Takashi: I was doing a PhD in Physics at the University of Tokyo. During that period, I created my own web pages as a distraction because I felt somewhat tired of physics. I received many responses from all over the world. Many non-Japanese told me that what I did was interesting and to keep on working at it. But few responses came from Japan. Maybe the Japanese culture lacks the idea of complimenting each other.

USHIRO Kanae: I studied basic plastic arts at the School of Art and Design at the University of Tsukuba. Later, I moved to Tokyo and there was not enough space to put

## TAKEOVER—WHO'S DOING THE ART OF TOMORROW

my art works in my apartment and so I started to use computers. When accessing his (Morimoto's) web page, I wondered what kind of person would hit upon such unique ideas, and that's how our relationship started.

OKADA: You made many things for mobile java.

MORIMOTO: I don't like TV games. The world in them is warped. The games are all about rescuing a princess in an imaginary kingdom, using magic and killing many characters.

USHIRO: I don't think that game machines and software should be praised. Humans are the ones who are great. This way of thinking dominates the game industry, and game creators can no longer produce new ideas.

MORIMOTO: Then we came up with "Finger Sumo." We did "Sushi Fortune Telling" for mobile java as a job and we discussed new ideas. The first idea was a game where two people can play on one cellular phone. The point was to make males and females get really close and to see what could come out from such a relationship.

There are already plenty of match games on mobile instruments, and there are games that an individual can download and also network games run by cellular phones. But there wasn't a game that two can play on a single cellular phone.

### Multiple communications KUWAKUBO Ryota

"Collaboration and communication are the most important factors of artwork, said KUWAKUBO Ryota, who defines himself as a "Device Artist." "I want to create creative tools as artwork since I want to show the nature of technology, for example, the behavior of an electron which is so truthful and beautiful."

When studying at the University of Tsukuba, School of Art and Design, he mainly created metal installations. After graduation, he moved to Tokyo to work at an electronics device



"Bitman," Meiwa Denki and KUWAKUBO Ryota



"Vomoder"—IT Devolution—sub-receiver for a cellular phone, KUWAKUBO Ryota

company. As his house in Tokyo was very small, he was looking at creating work on a small table and so chose electronic art.

“When implanting software to micro chips I tested how it could work at an electron level. Electrons show quick and clear reflections through testers and even though they are not aware of me, I could see the behavior of electrons.” After two years of working in a company, he became an independent artist collaborating with various artists, designers, and people in the entertainment business. This resulted in the “bitman” electronic device ‘toy’ designed with Meiwadenki, an electronic arts unit, as a multiple artwork sold at toy stores. He currently creates electronic art installations and designs multiple artworks such as toys and entertainment goods. Another aspect of his work involves applying for patents. He enjoys his work and the creative process that presents opportunities for collaboration with people from many backgrounds as well as the reactions of people to the works in his living room, giving rise to many topics of conversation.

You can see his work at his website <[www.vector-scan.com/](http://www.vector-scan.com/)>.

### Art and the new media society

If ICT and multi-channel media has already penetrated/entered into ordinary life, how would media/electric/science/art contribute to social development? I asked leaders of various art and creative fields in Tokyo.

#### Art and choosing your life

##### SUGIYAMA Tomoyuki

“With high resolution audio and visual expressions, the popular choices of changing life pose a challenge to the artist,” said SUGIYAMA Tomoyuki, the principal of Digital Hollywood ([www.dhw.co.jp/](http://www.dhw.co.jp/)), the biggest digital media design school in Japan. His initial career involved researching acoustics using computers, bringing the latest digital expressions to the Japanese entertainment industry. “Not everyone had the chance to become an artist or creator working in the media and entertainment business in Japan before the digital era arrived”, he said of his experience. Japanese television and film industries have largely employed the alumni of top grade colleges and artists occupying the alumni of art colleges, yet digital expressions have been breaking such elite system structures. “Existing education and production systems can’t produce good digital artists as now everyone can work in the media and entertainment business as professionals if they have the necessary skills,” he said of the currently changing situation. In fact, it appears that the digital effect artists who have begun to use computers as graphic tools are often over the age of 30, the victims of the old bankrupted economy (retrenched company employees), and housewives.

#### Art applied in Japanese ICT corporations

##### GOTOH Tomio

A project leader in the personal computer market that swept over Japan, GOTOH Tomio is a patron for electronic art. A semiconductor engineer at NEC, he developed projects to launch personal computers in the late 70’s, a series that commanded a share in the Japanese computer market before the arrival of WINDOWS. When attempting to launch a new home video game machine, he placed his hopes on the creative imaginations of electronic artists, giving technological solutions to artists in a kind of exchange process. “Yet applying the talents and imaginations of artists in company work and business is difficult,” he said. Management in Japanese ICT companies is still a one-way structure with the tech-



FURUTA Wataru "Burst The Earth" (2000)

nology part following the merchandise plan for marketing, or the technology part developed as high-end technology products. Companies have not given their own vision to the public fusing their own technological ideas and vision for marketing. "For most Japanese companies, supporting art work through emerging technologies has the same meaning as patronage for other arts such as classical music, so companies have not learnt from their (the artists') ideas and vision." Yet he forecasts that such trends will and must be changed. Currently everyone is involved in innovation, companies need their own vision that reflects both social and technological change: creating this vision through the eyes of artists would help merge this into different technologies, cultures, and social behaviors.

### Art applied to digital television FURUTA Wataru

"Societies of television, advertising, and music businesses have been moving huge amounts of money internationally. Among all this money moving, artists are being raised to top and high level visual and musical creative practices in Japan and are existing in these societies," said FURUTA Wataru, overall producer of the digital television drama "Burst The Earth," broadcast at the beginning of digital television service in Japan (November 1st, 2000). Most audiences have not been able to see it yet not able to see it yet, but its reputation has been booming and now many domestic and international video/film festivals are inviting its participation.

What if these top artists and creators, usually working in advertising films and music videos, could make digital movies about their own stories? This question is realized in "Burst The Earth." Furuta says, "When watching a great advertising film, I want to see the surrounding stories." Advertising films are a kind of art work watched by millions of people through television networks, yet they differ to ordinary art, in that they need to be actually watched in order to be seen. An environment of mega-multiple media distribution is open to criticism and evaluations from various people, and in this context it is possible for an artist to exist financially and socially. Yet for most video and media artists based in the ordinary *art* world, it is difficult to be active even though many distributing channels via digital television and broadband are available. "An artist who doesn't work in professional media does not have the same opportunities for presentation even though he or she may

be a good artist in the ordinary art world. The most important point, however, is how well artists can communicate with other creators and audiences.” For more on the story and details about “Burst The Earth,” visit the website: [www.bakuha.com/](http://www.bakuha.com/)

### Top-down-Art vs. Bottom-up-Art MORIWAKI Hiroyuki

“Digital technology is changing the existence of art dynamically,” said MORIWAKI Hiroyuki. He is a kinetic artist who also applies his skills to the entertainment world. For many Japanese people, he is renowned for creating the electronic costumes for KOBAYASHI Sachiko, the most famous entertainment singer in Japan, who has invested around 2 million Euros in the costumes.

“Artist society must change fundamentally along with the general public’s expectations of digital technology. Since the mid 90’s computers and the Internet have penetrated society quite widely, yet ordinary art society rejects the change to a digital era since the general public cannot deal with any more technology art” he noted. He describes the style of electronic art as a splitting into two forms. One is “top-down art”, dependent on a small group interested in a conservative art form. The other is “bottom-up art,” connecting actual media and business or public, able to be shown and valued by the general public anytime, anywhere. Top-down art is a closed inner society, often dependent upon voluntarism and difficult to apply to real society. At the technological level, audiences often have a higher technological literacy than the artists who are using the technology. Such audiences refuse and become tired with electronic/media art. This literacy difference brings a conceptual gap between audiences and artists.

“Art work can exist within social contexts and evaluations. People from various fields contact me seeking my imagination as an artist and now I find that my work disciplines are extending between producing electrical attractions at amusement parks and urban planning”.

With the further spread of ICT, many people are looking for a chance of changing the rigidity of society, not only within the art world itself, but especially because innovators are communicating at an inter-disciplinary level in many areas. Moriwaki believes that artists contributing to such an innovative movement present a trial for “takeover” themselves.

These artists whose expression is based in ICT, are similar in that their works present opportunities for intimate and natural communication with and between audiences, understanding the necessity of communication and collaboration with others even while they have their own expressive talents. Their creative fields involve multiple reproduction such as software and mass products, yet I think their styles will become the main stream of the Tokyo art scene. Such contents and experiments enable artistic communication or experience that may set new standards for appreciation, evaluation and definition of arts practices. For these reasons I would like to present their cases as signs or models of the new art domain after “takeover.”