Takahiko Iimura in Interview*

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Japanese artist Takahiko Iimura has created outstanding experimental films from the late 1950s. An important part of these are reflections on the concept of time or attempts to materialise temporal duration in the film medium, while his video pieces and performances explore the nature of language, representation, spectatorship, and the time lapse between a recorded event and its reproduction. The following interview examines such themes, and investigates the philosophical aspects of his work impregnated with Japanese culture. Our meeting took place at iimura's second home in New York, August '09, at the time of the release of his Talking Picture: the Structure of Viewing *on DVD.*

Takahiko Iimura: I have never been in Dublin, although I am very interested in Ireland's famous novelist.

Esperanza Collado: Samuel Beckett?

TI: No, James Joyce. Have you seen the video I made, *John Cage Performs James Joyce* (1985)?

EC: I have only seen the section in which Cage whispers part of *Finnegans Wake*.

TI: It is a private performance of Cage realizing his *Writing for the Fifth Time Through Finnegans Wake* in three different ways: reading, singing and whispering. The sound of Cage's voice was recorded as well as the background noise, using I-Ching chance operations.

EC: Did you meet Cage during your involvement in Fluxus?

TI: No, I met him in different circumstances. However, I don't consider myself as part of Fluxus, but a friend, although I was involved by way of making recordings of their events. I have worked with Yoko Ono too, whom I met back in Japan when I used to frequent her performances. I showed her my films and she made the soundtrack of *Ai/Love* in 1962. Nine years later in 1971, I made a film of her exhibition *Yoko Ono: This Is Not Here*, with John Lennon too. The exhibition was at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse (New York), and it attracted a large audience who seemed more interested in them as popular figures rather than in the artwork. It was a very serious show though; it included several significant works that had never been shown before.

EC: You have also written a book about the work of Yoko Ono.

TI: Yes, I have written about her artworks, mostly those produced in the 1960s. This book is a Japanese publication that has been quite popular, to the point of being republished several times. I am now looking for an English publication of it.

EC: What do you do now?

TI: The most recent piece I have made, apart from performing and setting up my installations for different emerging shows, is *Seeing/Hearing/Speaking* (2001). The starting point is a sentence from Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, translated by David B. Allison. This work is conceived as both a video and an installation in which I literally quote a sentence of what Derrida calls 'phenomenological essence'. The words "I hear myself at the same time that I speak" are repeated with certain modifications such as switching "I hear" and "I speak", then connecting to the first and thus making an endless sentence: "I hear myself at the same time that I speak to myself at the same time that I hear myself..." and so forth. This is one way to realize verbally simultaneity -although the gap remains time-wise between "I hear" and "I speak"- and I realised not only Derrida's statement, but also showed the discrepancy or *différance* -to put it in his own terms- between what is written and what is realised in the video. In the sentences "I who hear" and "I who speak", the subject 'I' is assumed as identical. This is not necessarily the case in the video, as the one who speaks does not hear his voice, but the audience. This work is in fact tightly connected to a previous piece I made in 1976, titled *Talking to Myself: Phenomenological Operation* (1978). I showed it personally to Derrida that same year in Paris and he liked it very much. Nevertheless, compiling my works on DVD format is my main current activity, and when I watch old material, I occasionally transform it if I consider that the work in question could be improved. I might add something new, subtract certain elements of it or edit together two pieces. On the other hand, I have just compiled three of my films that explore time and duration on a DVD, *On Time In Film/DVD*, which features three films: *24 Frames per Second* (1975-78), *Timed 1,2,3* (1972), and *One Frame Duration* (1977). These are far from being my only works focusing on or exploring time; I have extendedly worked with this subject, but I had to leave other works out -as, for instance, my film *1 to 60 Seconds* (1973).

EC: You have often prefaced your films by drawing metrical equations as a way of measuring time's passage, an interesting procedure that illustrates the correspondence between time and space. As in *1 to 60 Seconds*, many of your films exploring the experience of time are made solely with white and black leader, as if the lack of moving-images in cinema could provide a more direct depiction of time.

TI: In the 1970s, when I often worked applying graphic scores to editing, Conceptual Art had a considerable impact on me. I was very concerned with notions of time as indivisible duration or what Henri Bergson called *'durée'*, which is closer to the concept of time in the East. Many of the films I produced then could be seen as attempts to materialise temporal duration in film. As it has been said by John Cage

about music, time is the most important element, and the same applies to film. On the other hand, showing less rather than more is an artistic strategy that I believe awakens certain activity in the perceiver. For instance, a film that impressed me very much at the time was Andy Warhol's *Empire* (1964), because it makes you aware of temporal duration in a similar way to *1 to 60 Seconds*, but Warhol uses photographic illusion when he presents a photographed building. My approach is extremely subtle in *1 to 60 Seconds*, because the absence of photographic material results in an absence of movement, which is the element in film that modulates time. In *1 to 60 Seconds* I incorporated numbers to the leader in order to generate a more solid awareness of passage. The film consists in an additive progression of temporal sections divided by consecutive numbers, from 1 to 60, with a resulting duration of 30 minutes and 30 seconds. The number 1 appears on screen first. After 3 seconds of black leader the number 2 appears, because it's been 3 seconds from the beginning (1 second + 2 seconds). 3 seconds later you see the number 3; 4 seconds after this, the number 4 appears on screen and so on. The last number, the number 60, is preceded by 60 seconds of black leader on screen. For a deeply engaged viewer this process can be very exhilarating, as it is possible to know where exactly these numbered frames are, in spatial and temporal terms. One might try to foresee their appearance on screen, or the sounds that relate to them. In fact, when I screened it at Utica University in New York State, the students measured the timings by hitting the floor with their legs.

My utilisation of white and black leader could also be seen as an exploration of cinema's essential materials, where light is as important as time. The same way time cannot be disconnected from space, darkness is a fundamental part of light. The Chinese symbol yin/yang was a significant philosophical concept in my work of this period. Its double structure, positive within negative and negative within positive, means that polarities are interchangeable structures. It would be accurate to say that this is a sort of dialectics, although not exactly as dialectics has been understood in Western culture. As the Chinese symbol illustrates, there can be white within black and vice versa; they are interrelated structures. In film, this type of movement or exchange of positive and negative frames is displayed within time, and positive and negative become to a certain degree switchable. This is exactly what I did in *24 Frames per Second*. At the beginning, 1/24, that is one white frame among black, is repeated 24 times while it "travels" from position 1 to 24. This is followed by one single black frame among white frames that repeats the same procedure. Next, 2/24, or two white frames among black frames are followed by the opposite, and this structure is repeated until it reaches to 24/24, which is one second. At the end of 24/24, since the numerator increases in each cycle, white becomes black and black becomes white. You can thus say that yin/yang moves to yang/yin in time. For *MA* (*Intervals*) (1975-78) I also draw a diagram in order to structure white and black leader, sound and silence. In the first part of the film, I scratched a white line on black leader literally crossing over the frames. This is followed by the opposite process, a black line scratched on white leader. MA is a Japanese concept regarded as a space between, an interval, and an indivisible state of time and space. My intention, in this film, was to create a plural aspect in which continuity and intermittence could happen

simultaneously, and I think it is very natural how negative and positive space (black and white leader), sound and silence fall into place in this piece. 'Negative space' does not necessarily mean non-existence; it is a form of existence. Similarly, silence is part of the process. MA, the notion of the interval, can be regarded as active absence.

EC: Has Dziga Vertov influenced your work in any way? What you just said about an 'active absence' coincides with his theory of intervals. Vertov considered the intervals between movements as the artistic material of film, not motion itself, as if the intervals were spaces totally devoted to perception, as I believe it is the case with *Ma* (*Intervals*) and *MA: In the Garden of Ryoan-Ji* (1989). The poems that appear in the film seem to point clearly in this direction. I see another coincidental point between Vertov, your work, and Bergson's concept of perception, that which implies the observer as the center of an avatar of images.

TI: The poems that appear in *MA: In the Garden of Ryoan-Ji* were written by Japanese architect Arata Isozaki. They do indeed stress a strong state of contemplation or perception by emphasising literally the distance between things, the pauses between sounds. What these words express is similarly articulated both visually and musically. In the image though, there is no negative form, since images are visible at all times in the film. 'The distance' and 'pauses' are understood, visually, by the degree of emphasis. However, this film was my second exploration of the Japanese concept MA, made in collaboration with Isozaki and composer Takehisa Kosugi, and the intention wasn't just to produce a film about MA, but to involve the spectator in an experience of MA. Dziga Vertov's theory of the intervals wasn't a reference or an influence in the conception of MA. I never understood his theory the way you described it, although your mention of the relationship between 'intervals' and '*durée*', between Vertov and Bergson, is quite interesting. However, I also read Vertov's Kino-eye writings and found a certain affinity with my *MA*. The problem is that Vertov's theories are not necessarily clearly exemplified in his films, if I have not missed it, although I see that avatar of images spinning around the observer, the camera eye, in *The Man with A Movie Camera* (1929). There is a remarkable image in this film that inspired one of my works. The image depicts an eye displayed inside the lens of a movie camera. Of course there is a substantial difference between Vertov's film and my video, since his is silent while mine features words both spoken and supertitles. However, it was his approach on the camera eye and his inclusion of the observer as an integral part of the cinematic system that most interested me. I wanted to bring these ideas into my work by exploring the structure of seeing. In the tapes I made in 1975 and 1976, *OBSERVER/OBSERVED* and *OBSERVER/ OBSERVED/OBSERVER,* I took the relationship between observer and observed to a language level, working with a closed-circuit video system that connected a camera to a monitor. As in the sentence 'I see you', camera and monitor could mediate between 'I' and 'You', words that switch roles according to what is on and off the screen. The structure of the observer and the observed therefore has the structure of a round-trip. I wanted to involve the space around too, because I perceived this video shared some common features with structural film (yet the video consisted in a closed

circuit system of camera and monitor), although structural film often reduces space to the limitations of the frame/image.

EC: Indeed, with some exceptions, there is a very clear rejection of representation in your films, as if they didn't want to represent anything other than the mechanics and properties of the medium itself. This creates certain affinities between these works and structural/materialist film, which contrast drastically with your earlier works from the 1960s. I wonder if you had heard about or seen many experimental films prior to your time in New York, and what kind of influence flicker films had in your work?

TI: I saw Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960) when I went to Brussels in 1965 to show *Onan* (1963), which won a prize at the Petitie Van de Experimentele Film (Cinematheque Royale de Belgique). Then I came to New York in 1966, and Tony Conrad showed me *The Flicker* (1966). I was very impressed and I wanted to try doing something recurring to the same economy of materials, but trying something different from what I had seen. I wasn't interested in optical illusion whatsoever, although this may occur, for instance, in *MA*(*Intervals*), when, after a period of looking at a very strong white line, when the white phase begins, there appears an after-image. The eye still sees an illusionary white line. Nevertheless, my idea was still quite logical, although its structure might be hard to perceive: a continuous line going from white to black and from black to white, punctuated by a certain timing (1,2, and 3 seconds) of spacings and sounds. My concern, in *MA*(*Intervals*), moved from the overall structure of 24 Frames Per Second- to a more 'moment to moment' perception of time/space while repeating certain variable patterns.

Shutter (1971) is the first piece in which I explored these ideas, although rather than being interested in generating a flicker effect, I wanted to experiment with shutter speeds using only the light bulb of the projector. I shot the shutter of the projector with a camera located behind the screen which shoots the screen at different speeds, switching from 8 to 16 to 24 to 36 frames per second. I switched the projector speed too, from 16 to 24 FPS and I used a fade in/fade out device. The resulting image is an oval (or an eye) form created uniquely by intermittent light that moves constantly since it changes in size: it comes/expands and goes/shrinks. The sound consists of white noise synchronised with a sharp mechanical sound that I obtained by attaching a microphone to the projector's gate. However, it was extremely difficult, to say the least, to see experimental films in Tokyo in the 1960s. I used to read journals and other publications, both domestic and foreign, but I never had the chance to see screenings. In the mid 1960s, I became aware of what had been called in New York 'Underground Film' through reading. I tried to imagine the films by looking at photographs of them in books (laughs). So, my formation was primarily based on what I could read in Tokyo. By then, I used to work on regular 8mm format, blowing it up to 16mm afterwards. I couldn't afford a viewer or rewinders, so I had to hold the filmstrip with my chopsticks (laughs). I still wasn't making metrical montage, of course, that would have been impossible. My editing wasn't yet to be so precise, but my filmmaking was abstract enough. By that time, I would shoot with a regular 8mm

camera. Therefore, I used photographic material in my early films, although, in the case of *Ai* (*Love*), for instance, the shots were so close to the subjects during the sexual act that the image becomes abstract and difficult to discern as such. This way I could avoid the censorship film laboratories were applying at the time, and I guess it could be considered as a form of rejection in terms of representation too: I wanted to remix body parts regardless of their sex and to meet all the possible matching parts. During those early years of my practice, on the other hand, I was strongly influenced by neo-dada. Perhaps this could be better perceived in *A Dance Party in the Kingdom of Lilliput* (1964), which in fact has no relation whatsoever with Gulliver's story. It is a film I made in 1964, two years before I moved to New York: a slightly absurd, comedy play with Sho Kazazura that took inspiration from a novel by Kafka. In a review about this film, Sam McElfresh saw a relation that I wasn't aware of with the kind of comedy of Buster Keaton and Mack Sennet. However, I worked with actors in this film, but everything was improvised. There are a number of very short scenes or chapters showing single or combined actions. These weren't too unusual but rather quotidian actions, although everything was somehow taken out of context. For instance a man keeps his mouth open for a long time, scratches his back, goes up and down a stairway, comes out of the top of a building and hangs from a cloth line while putting himself in a huge bag, urinates on the ground, etc. My original idea for this work was actually to arrange the sequences in different orders every time I showed it and eventually to set up two screenings side by side with different editing orders, but it was not a very practical idea.

EC: How do you approach exhibition modes in your work? I wonder if you see some of them more suitable for a traditional screening in which the audience can sit down, as for instance, in those works that deal with time and require a certain state of concentration. Alternatively, do you think, considering their repetitive nature and non-evolutive structures, your works can be similarly experienced properly in the white cube, as film installations?

TI: I have experimented with many different ways of distributing film and its devices in space, as well as ways to approach the audience in film screenings, installations and performances, in both traditional venues and gallery spaces. Even so, I tend to think most of my works can be similarly screened as single projections or within an environment in which the devices of cinema can be contemplated too, letting the audience move around them. Sometimes I hang filmstrips from the ceiling or the walls, and very often there isn't a projection even. It is a way to work with film and its devices -projectors, loopers, reels- as plastic materials or physical objects. In these cases in which cinema is not only to be seen on a flat surface, the screen, the space should not be too dark. Sometimes there is no clear distinction between installation, film screening and performance in my work. Other times the viewer is the actual performer, when he or see moves around or participates somehow in an installation, as it is the case in *Register Yourself* (1972), *Project Yourself* (1973), or *Back to Back* (1974).

EC: You have explained in a piece of writing how the word cinema in Japanese, '*eiga*', refers more to reflection and projection than to the illusion of moving-images. The Japanese understanding of cinema seems to take more into consideration space and the event of light. I am thinking of Chinese shadow play too as a form of pre-cinema... However, your video works have often raised linguistic questions in relation to the presentation of image/sound. How does your performance/DVD piece *The Talking Picture* (1982) approach these ideas, which nevertheless reveal somehow the mechanics of illusion of the moving-image?

TI: The words movie, motion picture, cinema, all stress movement, which is the most essential illusion in cinema but, in the Japanese word *'eiga '* the emphasis is indeed on the state of reflection rather than motion. The same applies to the Chinese for cinema, which literally means 'electric shadow picture', an image projected as a shadow, an Asian invention that predates cinema. It is, therefore, a different conception of cinema, which I have explored in my work, particularly in my lecture/performance *The Talking Picture* (*The Structure of Film Viewing*). In this piece, I question the institution of picture presentation, the nature of representation itself and the consumption of images as objects. An image can have different implications depending on the sense or meaning words might impose on it. Conversely, a same text -or speech in the case of *The Talking Picture*- might influence differently the perception of images. In the piece in question, I present a white screen invaded by my shadow, because I sit in front of the projector and before the screen. At one point, I ask the audience if I am presenting or not a picture, if what they see is a picture, etc. The intention was indeed to present the structure of picture-viewing using myself as both an object and subject. This idea comes also from a desire to be the audience and the performer simultaneously.

EC: I think you rather wanted to be the film itself.

TI: (laughs)