

Still from Idemitsu's video *Hideo, It's Me, Mama*, 1983. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.

work, when seen as a whole, forms a kind of mandala.

Although Video Hiroba was short-lived as an organization—by the late 1970s the group disbanded as its members pursued radically different matters, from computer graphics to fiction to sculpture—several of the original members are still important figures in Japanese video as artists, curators or teachers. Fujiko Nakaya abandoned the form of political documentation exemplified by her *Minamata* videotape to concentrate on nonvideo “fog installations” that are often used as settings for music and dance. In 1980 she founded Video Gallery Scan, which has played a major role as a distribution service, an archive and a screening studio for video in Tokyo. It has promoted the medium through a newsletter, competitions and international festivals, most recently in February 1992.

Mako Idemitsu was a rebel who broke

away from her cultured and traditional family to study film at Columbia University in New York. She subsequently lived for eight years in California, where she experimented with both film and video, returning to Japan in time to be a founding member of Video Hiroba. Her innovative video work began in California with her attempts to study the people around her, to penetrate their psychology and understand how they related to others, by asking pairs of people to discuss spontaneously on camera their relationships or a specific psychological topic. When Idemitsu returned to Japan she continued such video “studies” as part of an effort to come to grips with her country’s profoundly misogynist society. She explored women’s conscious and unconscious behavior by recording their daily routines, taking advantage of the you-are-there sense of reality that video imparts and the apparent candidness of people on camera. After first making low-budget collaborative projects with family

and friends, she began to develop complicated scripts and to hire professional actors and production crews. In the context of Japanese video, her use of plots is her most distinctive feature.

Idemitsu spent nearly a decade creating videotapes on the “Great Mother” theme. In these she scrutinizes the emotional interactions of mother-child relationships, revealing the underlying volatility of seemingly placid households. Her fictive episodes might depict a spoiled daughter who insolently picks up men but is incapable of leaving her dispassionate professional mother, or a despondent artist painfully struggling with identity, career and social conventions after she is forced into a marriage. In her video narratives Idemitsu investigates family discord to expose the constraints of social conventions and the conflicts caused by living in a hybrid Japanese-and-Western culture. She provides troubling observations, never solutions.



Nakajima: *L'Ame du bois*, 1991, video installation at the Zekou Art Gallery, Paris.

Idemitsu's videos take place in claustrophobic rooms that represent ordinary urban homes. In each room there is a prominently placed television set; its screen, displaying close-up shots of various family members, is a window into her characters' minds. In *Hideo, It's Me, Mama* (1983), a son away at college is shown only on the television set kept on his mother's kitchen table. Both go about their daily lives: he studies, listens to music on earphones, she putters in the kitchen, makes dinner for her husband. The mother puts the son's meals in front of the television and he consumes them on screen.

With sound tracks based exclusively on dialogue and ambient noise, Idemitsu's videotapes are more like documentaries than dramas. This merger of fact and fiction is a familiar aspect of conventional docudramas seen on Japanese television, but Idemitsu's work (shown only in the typical video milieu of galleries, museums and festivals) gains a

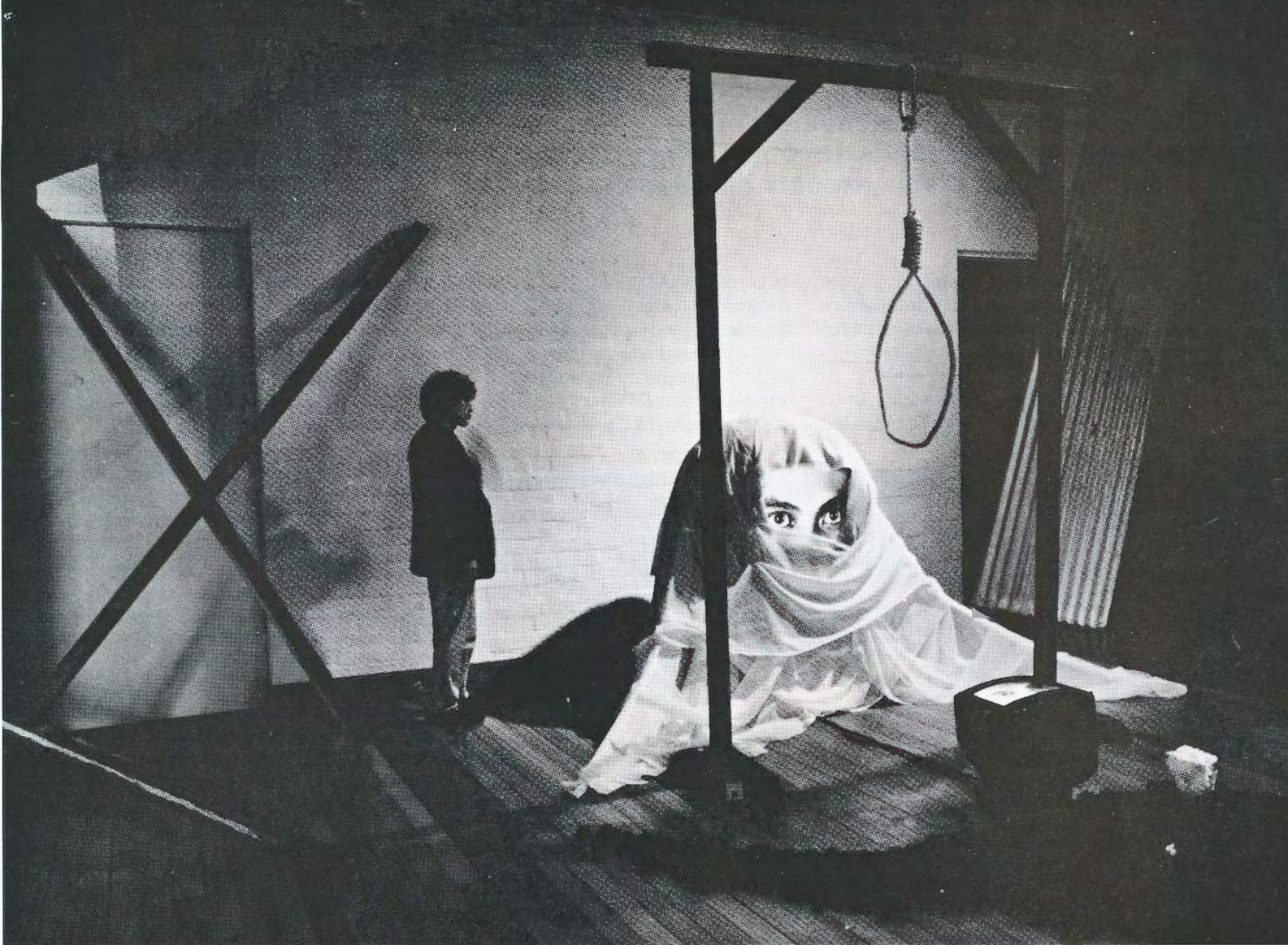
psychological twist from the intruding presence of the monitor.

Most early video works in Japan (as elsewhere) concentrated on creating perceptual dislocation or studying the video-making process itself. The work of the '70s artists most often consists of real-life events fragmented or abstracted into sequences of moments, or well-crafted, carefully composed images concerned with the two-dimensionality of the TV screen. Katsuhiko Yamaguchi's work is typical. His 1977 *Ooi and Environs*, a portapak stroll around his home neighborhood, is colorized in distorting, sometimes cotton-candy hues. In his recent video sculptures, Yamaguchi is still preoccupied with light and movement; unfortunately his work tends to resemble the kinetic light shows of the mid-'60s on St. Mark's Place.

But Yamaguchi has been very influential. Japanese civic leaders turn to him when

planning large, world's-fair-like "expositions," as was the case in Kobe in 1981, Tsukuba in 1985 and Nagoya in 1989 and '91. He has also been a prominent teacher. When Japanese art colleges in Tokyo and elsewhere began to offer video courses in the '80s, the teachers were from the Hiroba generation (then in their 40s or 50s), while their students tended to be 20 years younger. For that reason video in Japan has sometimes been described as jumping a generation. The students took up editing processes, which were central in the U.S. in the '70s but only became possible in Japan in the '80s.³

Among the younger, post-Hiroba artists are Masaki Fujihata and Hiroya Sakurai. Sakurai, who studied with Yamaguchi, was one of about 20 young videomakers who organized their own group exhibitions in 1984, '85 and '86, under the name Video Cocktail. He makes installations that include nonnarrative video and thus can be



Hiroya Sakurai: *TV Terrorist*, 1987; installed at the second Australian Video Festival. Courtesy Video Gallery SCAN, Tokyo.

viewed at the observer's own pace. One of his best-known works is the 1987 installation *TV Terrorist*, shown in video festivals in Japan and Australia. At a time of terrorism in Europe and the Middle East, Sakurai raised questions about the mass media's manipulation of information and representation of violence. Of this work he wrote, "Why must I kill? Television told me. The media as fiction blinds me, robs reality from me... I want to make everything blow apart like a time bomb in my path."

Fujihata also showed with *Video Cocktail*; he is known for his elegantly realized high-tech computer graphics rather than installations with political implications. In 1985, while working for the Sedic computer design group, he directed his whimsical and sophisticated *Maitreya*, which combines a Buddhist text with images of proliferating geometric objects. He then formed a small design company to integrate video and computer graphics, but now has moved on to

Nakajima's objective is to heighten viewers' awareness of ecological dilemmas, and there is conscious irony in the fact that he does so through high technology.

other projects. In March of this year he presented an installation commissioned by NTT (Japan's AT&T); shown in Tokyo's Spiral Building, the work was designed to have the impact of virtual reality. Viewers experienced Fujihata's spatial environment wearing infrared headphones, hearing pleasant and unpleasant sounds triggered by an invisible grid contained in a sloped vinyl floor. His intention was to create a fascinating aural and physical experience, and his work makes fun of technology at the same time that it makes fun for the viewer.

Some of the most interesting video work

in Japan has been produced by "visitors" to the medium. Recognized abroad as one of the best Japanese videotapes ever made is a 1982 collaboration between two men who had previously worked only peripherally with the medium. Shuntaro Tanikawa, a poet, and Shuji Terayama, a playwright, had been working for more than 30 years with an interdisciplinary group of artists in Tokyo. Surrounding themselves with diverse talents, these longtime friends had taken up various artistic means, both popular and underground, before they tried video.

In their *Video Letter*, made with the aid of the artist-run video center Image Forum,

Dumb Type's 1987 performance/installation *Pleasure Life* is a hypothetical view of the near future, while its 1990 *pH* looks at impersonal, repressive aspects of megacity life.

they used rudimentary consumer video equipment to update a venerated literary form, the collaborative *renga* (linked verse). They exchanged electronic "letters"—monologues composed directly in front of the recording camera with a theatrical sense of timing and a poetic command

at current popular culture. The group, now consisting of architects, engineers, graphic designers, choreographers, musicians, actors, painters, video artists, sculptors and computer programmers, was formed in 1984, when the founders were students at art school. Free-lance design work by members



Film still from Go Riyu's *Zaze*, 1989. Courtesy Japan Society.

of language (Japanese, with English subtitles). Speaking spontaneously, they considered words, values, images. Each ruminative "letter" reflected the reality of a particular moment, yet each was connected to the preceding one. *Video Letter* has a particular poignancy because of Terayama's fatal illness, which brought the project to an end. His death is acknowledged in the last "letter." The work, subsequently edited by Tanikawa, became a powerful mourning poem for Terayama.

Video is central to an unusual interdisciplinary arts collective called Dumb Type. Internationally known for its performances, Dumb Type takes an irreverent look

of the group supports their collective activities. Dumb Type is based in calm, historic Kyoto, which was the capital of Japan for a thousand years. The city is still governed by time-honored ways and a strong sense of the past—to which the group responds creatively.

Dumb Type's performance/installation *Pleasure Life* (1987-88) is an ironic, hypothetical view of the near future, a mélange of new and old Japan. The English title conjures up both the dispassionate routines of daily life and the refined culture of Kyoto's geisha houses. That antiquated pleasure world, where music, poetry, conversation and cuisine were relished as sophisticated conventions, has today been diluted and

transformed into an electronic environment of *karaoke* bars,⁴ fast-food restaurants and celebrity talk shows.

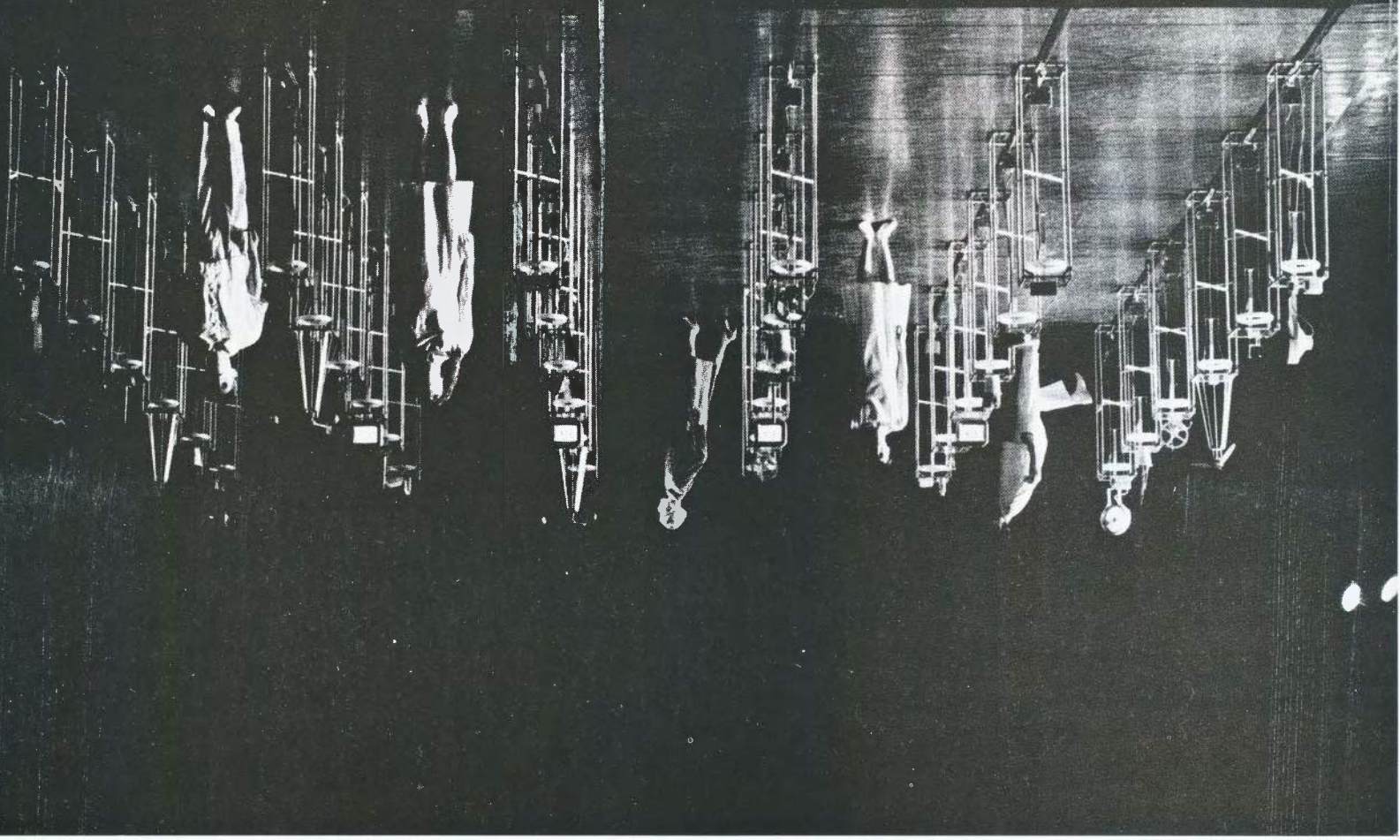
As *Pleasure Life* evolved and was presented at various performance spaces, its original set—a white platform that also served as a screen for slide and video projections—was replaced by a more developed and larger set that resembles an integrated circuit suffering from urban sprawl. It is a bristling grid consisting of 36 metal-frame pedestals supporting ordinary household objects such as room fans or glasses of water along with TV sets depicting images of sky and grassy fields.

In front of video images of calendar pages, the performers silently move among the pedestals to the accompaniment of mellifluous yet commanding voices and TV-jingle music on the videotape sound track (the production's lights, projections and sound are operated by computer). The set itself seems to actively participate as the white neon light-rings within the pedestal frames switch on and off. The performers repetitively mime such actions as going to work, relaxing and having a picnic, brushing their teeth, changing the channels.

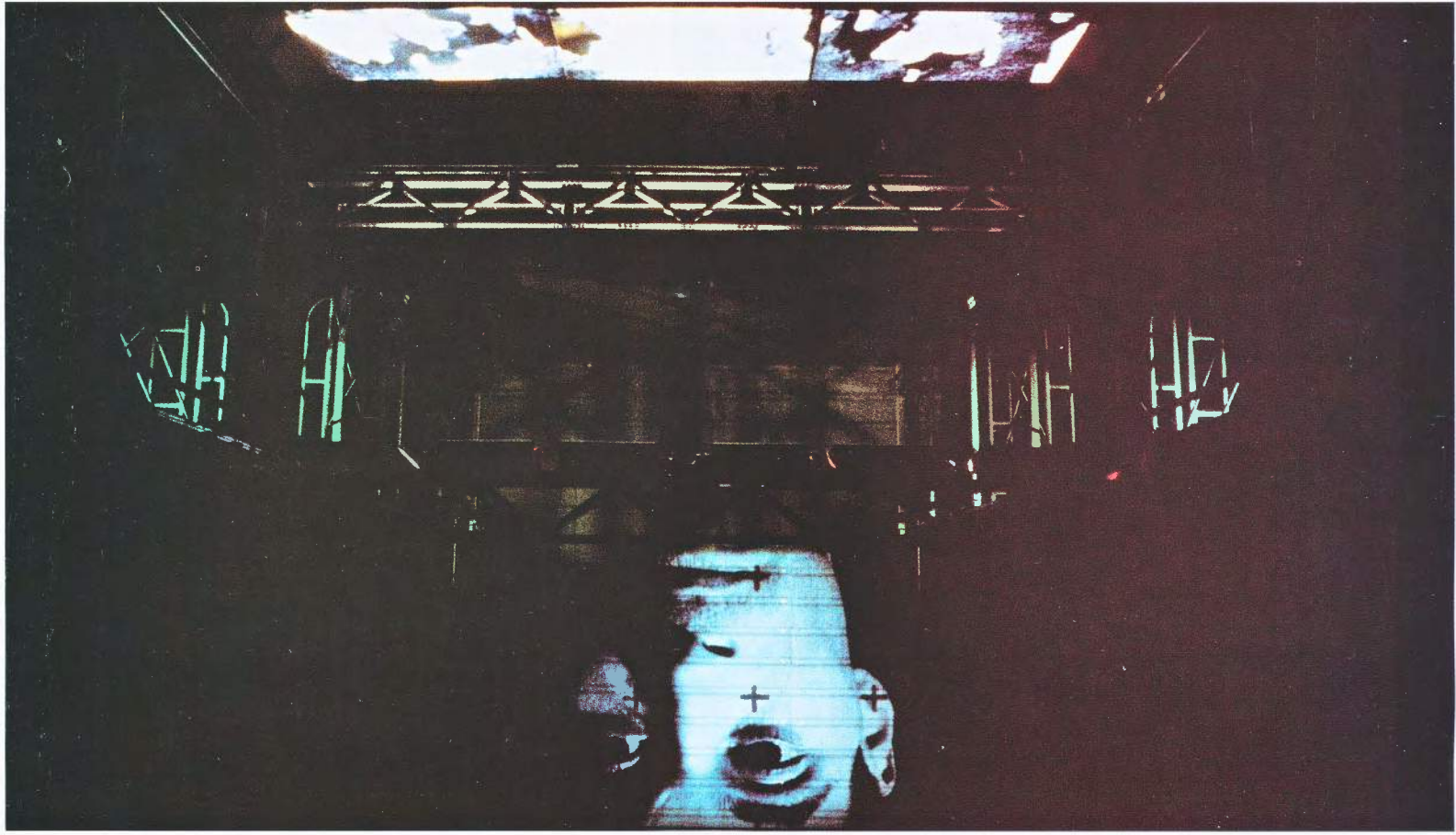
Dumb Type's new performance/installation, *pH* (1990-91), contemplates the impersonal and repressive aspects of megacity life; it examines the way we regard our electronic tools as status symbols and how we pay little attention to who controls the programs we see on them. The title is meant to imply a measurement—a litmus test—for modern life. Collaborating with writer/translator Alfred Birnbaum, Dumb Type constructed an opaque text based on a mixture of English and Japanese words. The words lead one to think that the text has a coherent meaning, yet they actually constitute only a flow of sound. In this work Dumb Type is looking at Japan's changing relationship to the United States. The use of nostalgia-provoking '60s pop music from America subtly suggests the fleetingness of success—and hints that Japan's recent financial power might well prove to be precarious.

Viewers of *pH* sit on high, narrow bleachers along the periphery of the stage. The action occurs around a menacing set of metal frames that aggressively sweep over the rectangular, boxlike performance area like the light-emitting bars of an enormous photocopier. Projected from the uppermost moving frame onto and across the white stage floor are such generic yet politically charged symbols as dollar, pound and yen signs.

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*Above, view of Dumb Type's performance/installation pH, 1990-91.
Below, view of Pleasure Life, 1987-88, a performance/installation by the same group.*



Electronic

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The stiff actions of five performers convey their obedience to strictly codified social behavior. Three women, clad in beige slips and moving in unison, make unemotional grimacing smiles and utter primal cries as they repeat such routine actions as sitting down or placing provisions in supermarket carts. They submit to the forceful, almost brutal, actions of two male performers who shove them against the walls, push them down into chairs. The men put on and take off similar suits and shoes, as if portraying the same character. A grainy, unstable videotape transferred to film is projected in black and white onto one end of the set. Consisting of alternating close-ups of staring eyes and dreamy, indistinct urban scenes, the video is a kind of stream-of-consciousness landscape that provides insight into the mentality of the male characters. This work has already been seen in Europe as well as Japan, and last July, Creative Time presented it at New York's cavernous Anchorage space beneath the Brooklyn Bridge.

The media-conscious Dumb Type group operates in several genres. The foremost is live performance, but the sets also function as sculpture. The *Pleasure Life* set was shown as an installation in the exhibition "Against Nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties," which toured the U.S. between 1989 and '91 [see *A.i.A.*, Apr. '90]. Moreover, the group has documented its work in a schematic book and a videotape that provides a bird's-eye view of their brisk actions on stage. Sophisticated about technology and quite serious about articulating a vision, the members of Dumb Type belong to a self-confident and generally pleasure-loving generation that is less restricted by conventions than its war-traumatized parents and more comfortable with moving back and forth between the fine arts of the West and Japan's 1992 "high-tech" definition of itself.

Now that film and video are so interchangeable, there are artists who seek to combine the effects of both mediums in one production. They also alternate between filmmaking projects, which require sharply detailed images and a large projection system, and video works, which take advantage of the sense of immediacy and intimacy of the small screen. One of these new-era artists is 28-year-old Go Riyu. An actor, filmmaker, scriptwriter and sometime music-video creator, Riyu, like Idemitsu, works in

that ambiguous area where reality and fiction blur. He uses video to examine society's subtle but pervasive controls and the relationship of the individual to the group. He looks at the stark difference between people's social facades and their genuine motives, as well as the male and female aspects of every human being.

Last year his film *Zaze* (1989) was presented in New York at the Japan Society's Young Japanese Cinema Festival. *Zaze* is the leader of a popular rock band who "drops out" after his group achieves extraordinary success. Seen by his buddies as a mystic with emotional strength, he is fawned over by all kinds of assertive and beguiling young women. But he is overcome by feelings of emptiness. He picks up a Video-8 camera and stares into his soul. *Zaze*, with a striking detachment, tapes himself and his friends along the Tokyo waterfront and then withdraws to his nearby dilapidated loft with his VCR and simple camera. For *Zaze*, video is both an honest companion and a kind of Zen meditation device.

Riyu represents the transitional Japan: he came of age amid affluence and post-modernism, conversant with Jingles⁵ and surrounded by examples of American-influenced pop culture such as the Elvis and James Dean look-alikes of the '70s and '80s. As a child he acted professionally for television. He has appeared in a number of recent movies, playing the adolescent part in Paul Schrader's *Mishima*. He went to an "arts" high school in the Kichijoji section of Tokyo, where he started making Super-8 films. Also an accomplished scriptwriter, in 1980 he won first prize in the annual *Pia* award for emerging talent⁶ for his own film, *Lesson One*.

As a playful sort of hobby and as a favor for his rock-musician friends, Riyu has been making low-budget music videos about alienation. Spoofing film noir and sci-fi styles such as that of *Blade Runner*, he freely experiments with equipment and concentrates on spontaneity. His rough promotional sketches are shown in clubs and on music stations. They have the same energy and hip stylization found in video games, commercials and trendy magazines with names like *Garō* (girl) and *Brutus*.

Experimental video has now existed quietly on the fringes in Japan for 20 years. In the '70s it could be said that Japanese videotapes were clearly Eastern in sensibility, having a particular kind of concentration, a flowing sense of time and lyrical use of color; today, with Japan's increasing internationalization, such distinctions are harder to make. Some artists, such as

Yoichiro Kawaguchi, are experimenting with "high definition" video computer graphics, creating imaginary underwater worlds. Although Kawaguchi's well-crafted, exquisite images are rather innocuous, he has opened corporate doors for others. A number of artists, improvising with cruder tools, are trying to direct viewers' attention back to nature. Atsushi Ogata, for example, juxtaposes indoor views in a farming village with outdoor shots, as if to compare culture and nature, but he switches the sound tracks for the two settings.

Video artists in Japan have had to be resourceful, given the limitations of their venues and markets and the restrictions imposed by traditional definitions of art. They have eked out livelihoods by teaching or free-lancing in industry. Today a few visionary souls recognize the extraordinary potential video and computers have together, and they are persistently exploring new opportunities beyond mainstream mass entertainment. Perhaps these artists will point to new possibilities somewhere between Eastern and Western esthetics. □

1. The catalogue *Shigeko Kubota: Video Sculpture* (New York, American Museum of the Moving Image, 1991) was edited by Mary Jane Jacob, with a foreword by Rochelle Slovin and essays by Brooks Adams, Moira Roth and JoAnn Hanley. The exhibition was on view at AMMI Apr. 26-Sep. 15, 1991.

2. Another group, the Video Information Center, was founded in 1974 by Ichiro Tezuka to tape *Butoh* performances and other cultural events for archival preservation. Around the same time, experimental filmmaker Nobuhiro Kawanaka and organizer Katsue Tomiyama founded a media workshop called the Japan Underground Film Center, which introduced such figures as Stan Brakhage and Paul Sharits to Japan. The organization's name was a reflection of the difficult and avant-garde situation of media arts at the time. Now known as Image Forum, the group also publishes a serious art magazine of the same name.

3. Editing equipment was not available to Japanese artists in the '70s. But in the '80s, school facilities were augmented by corporate offerings. Companies such as JVC, seeking to expand consumer video, organized festivals of home videos and set up "post-production centers" so that amateurs could edit their festival entries. Artists were quick to take advantage of these centers.

4. Patrons of these popular "hostess" bars select a song title from the bar's library of laser video disks and sing their favorite pop songs into a microphone—the lyrics scrolling across "soft porn" video images—as musical backup bellows from a heavily amplified sound system.

5. The English words used in advertising more for sound than for sense.

6. *Pia* is a biweekly magazine guide to cultural events in and around Tokyo. Founded in 1972 by former members of university film clubs, it sponsors an annual festival for up-and-coming filmmakers.

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