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2019  
Keiichi  
Tanaka

# When Video Promised a Sci-Fi Future

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The pursuit of communication in the works of Yoshida Minoru



**YOSHIDA MINORU**, *Epicurism of Space Universe on the Rock*, 1975, photo documentation of performance at Shinnecock Beach, New York. Photo by Gary Jacquemin. Courtesy Midori Yoshida and Ulterior Gallery, New York.

In the two years since I first encountered Yoshida Minoru's *Epicurism of Space Universe on the Rock* (1975), the video performance has stuck with me. In it, a lonely figure of an extraterrestrial explorer, wearing a partially-constructed, plexiglass-clad space suit, makes his way toward a beach, climbing over rocks as a ventilation tube swings haphazardly off the back of his bubble-shaped helmet. He weaves between what appear to be, from the low-quality black-and-white video recording, either well-worn pillars from a long-abandoned pier or some variety of thin, alien plants. Although the

video itself has no sound, occasional close-ups of the performer's face reveal pursed lips and inflated cheeks that indicate some sort of sound component that has been lost to us. The figure explores the landscape in a measured, meditative fashion, stopping on occasion to perform a ritual in which he straightens his back and extends his arms in and out, either bending forward and back at the waist, or rotating his upper body side to side. At times, this set of actions appear to be a welcoming gesture toward a sparse audience of beachgoers; in other scenes, it resembles a prayer ritual directed

toward the sea. Nearing the video's end, we see him climbing awkwardly up the outside of an observation platform and banging several times on the door of a small hut next to a skeletal lighthouse. The knocking yields no response. The dominant impression I am left with, as the figure recedes beyond the focal range of the camera into the fuzzy gray static landscape of early video, is of a series of communicative near misses that feel strangely appropriate to the current moment.

Yoshida had been working with themes of space, alien-life forms, technology,



**YOSHIDA MINORU**, *Epicurism of Space Universe on the Rock*, 1975, photo documentation of performance at Shinnecock Beach, New York. Photo by Gary Jacquemin. Courtesy Midori Yoshida and Ulterior Gallery, New York.

psychedelia and electronic sounds since the latter half of the 1960s, drawing on the colorful curvilinear abstractions he had developed in his earlier painting practice as inspiration for sculptural installations that incorporated light, sound and movement. He attended a high school specializing in science before enrolling in art school and later joining the Gutai Art Association in 1965. Yoshida was well positioned to ride the wave of *kankyō geijutsu*, the technological environment art movement that was established in the lead-up to Expo '70 in Osaka—Asia's first world's fair. His hand-machined, multisensory electronic installations blended modernist industrial design with "alien" plant life—such as a plexiglass sculpture meant to represent a bisexual flower—through the use of black lights and fluorescent acrylic, motors and stainless-steel reflectors, Bathclin-dyed liquid and sound synthesizers. But while seeking to express a bright future through the fusion of technology and biological life, the vision he projected through these works was problematically rooted in nonhuman perspectives. This perhaps explains why his work fit so well within the spectacle of the world's fair, with its focus on material culture and the built environment, leading to the inclusion of four of his works—including a plastic moving car used in a performance at Festival Plaza—at various Expo-related exhibitions and events.

His participation clashed with the stance of his friends and collaborators in the Kyoto contingent of anti-Expo (*hanpaku*) artists, who critiqued the event for its corporate sponsorship, nationalist tone and art-washing of the military-industrial complex that was providing a platform for the American-led war in Vietnam. Yoshida decided to leave Japan for the United

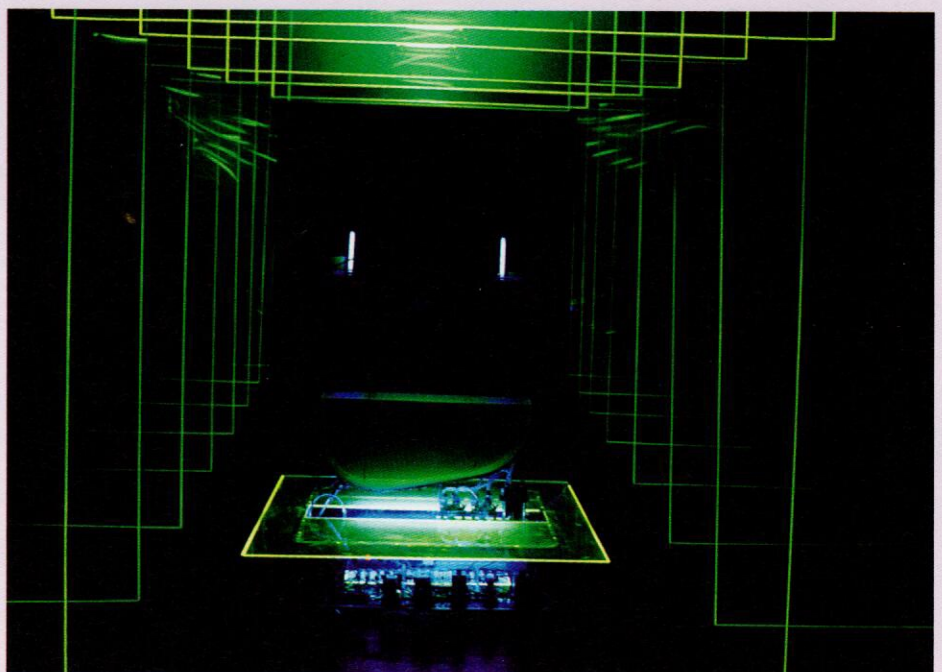
States before the start of Expo '70, officially because of his participation in the Art and Technology Program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and unofficially, perhaps, due to his ambivalence toward the contentious, technophilic show that flaunted corporate and national capital. As he wrote in a text, translated by Reiko Tomii, for the pre-Expo group exhibition, "International Psytech Art Exhibition – Electromagica '69," at the Ginza Sony Building:

Today, humanity desires and gathers information. Here and there on this earth, computers memorize and sort information. When needed, they provide the most appropriate answers

within seconds. Politicians and economists believe this will greatly impel progress. But even though computers may be great for accumulating wealth, they have been unable to control youth power and student power, which represent the spontaneous generation of EP3, Third Earth Power . . .

The Old Power is so intent on emphasizing capital; it inputs its capital into computers in order to increase the profit of its output tenfold. EP3, in contrast, empowers even artists. It consists of the so-called civilization bums.

This attitude might help explain the shift in his work away from multisensory automated objects and environments in favor of technologically aided performances. His videotaped performances from 1974 to 1976 feature a fluorescent acrylic electronic-synthesizer jacket, intended to aid the human performer and set him apart as an "extraterrestrial." In a video of his performance at New York's Artists Space in 1974, we see him standing on a pile of sand from which he launches himself, suspending and then inverting himself using a system of pulleys. At the same time, he uses the synthesizer jacket to create variously pitched electronic drones studded with beeps and chirps reminiscent of computer-processing sounds from low-budget 1960s sci-fi shows. As the video cuts back and forth between performance footage and photographs of Yoshida suspended at various angles, we see him invite an audience member to try out the suspension. The singularity of Yoshida's figure is clear, distinguished by the acrylic-and-



Installation view of **YOSHIDA MINORU**'s *EP3*, 1969, video feed and kinetic light-and-sound machine, dimensions variable, at "Electromagica '69," Ginza Sony Building, Tokyo, 1969. Courtesy Midori Yoshida and Ulterior Gallery, New York.



**YOSHIDA MINORU**, *The Theory of New Relativity*, 1974, photo documentation of performance at Artists Space, New York. Courtesy Midori Yoshida and Ulterior Gallery, New York.

electronic outfit and photographic stills, but his invitations to others to share in that perspective speaks to his interest in communication processes.

Over the next year, Yoshida's performances at the Annual Avant Garde Festival of New York and on street corners in SoHo saw him performing as an extraterrestrial in ever more public sites, and with increasing interactivity between himself and the audience. At Shinnecock Beach (in Southampton, New York), he

engaged beachgoers by asking them, "What do you think of [sic] space universe?"—although these conversations are not documented in the above-mentioned video of the event, *Epicurism of Space Universe on the Rock*. In these acts, we see a move away from the gallery and toward greater attempts at communication that might bridge the gap between an extraterrestrial and humankind.

By 1976, his performances included language and communication as explicit content. In a street-side piece on North

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**"We see attempts at communication that might bridge the gap between an extraterrestrial and humankind."**

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Moore Street in lower Manhattan, Yoshida began by unspooling long paper scrolls inscribed with densely packed *kanji* (Chinese) characters, then adding new characters with inkstone and brush to incomplete scrolls while reading the characters aloud according to their Japanese pronunciations. All the while, his synthesizer jacket produced an irregularly interrupted electronic drone. Later in the performance, he wrapped himself in the scrolls and proclaimed in English that "people is moving." Three months earlier in Woodstock, New York, he had been accompanied by several other acrylic, jacket-clad, silver-eyed extraterrestrials as he explored an abandoned hotel, again to the accompaniment of electronic drones and chirps. As he unrolled scrolls in the hotel, two female extraterrestrials read select characters aloud in pairs: one read the sound in Japanese while the other roughly translated the terms, such as "water" or "heaven," into English. Yoshida then later used cupfuls of sand to write out *kanji* characters on the ground, on top of paper that was later set ablaze.

Despite its centrality to these video performances, language here is never straightforward. The scrolls are written in Chinese and lack the *hiragana* or *katakana* characters that connect and inflect Chinese compounds in written Japanese; yet Yoshida and his companions still performed Japanese readings of these characters. The effect of playing these different linguistic materialities against each other in spoken word echoes the chanting of Buddhist sutras or the esoteric proclamations of a Confucian scholar. They are sounds that encode meaning opaquely, requiring conscious decryption. Additionally, female extraterrestrials who translate the scrolls from written Chinese into Japanese and English read only individual characters, so while a translation was completed, any meaning that might have been gleaned from the sequencing of characters remains unclear. Moreover, the translations provided are only approximate, with *hotoke*—meaning "Buddha"—translated as "Buddhism," while *taberu*—"eat"—is rendered as "food." Given Yoshida's



**YOSHIDA MINORU**, *Synthesizer Jacket #2*, 1975, photo documentation at the 12th Annual Avant Garde Festival of New York. Courtesy Midori Yoshida and Ulterior Gallery, New York.

invocation of Epicurean philosophy in the titles of these performances, these plays can be viewed through an atomist lens, wherein the materiality of language is a surface-level emergent phenomenon masking the fundamental similarity of all things, composed as they are of atomic units. This essential similarity forms the grounds for these acts of translation, in spite of the difficulty that the distance between the materialities of different languages and cultures creates.

The materiality of video, too, seems an important issue within these pieces. The rhetoric around video emphasizes in both the US and Japan of the 1970s the communicative potential of the medium. In his 1971 book *Guerilla Television*, film producer Michael Shamberg writes: "Recording on videotape is analogous to writing, the tape itself is equivalent to paper, and playback through a TV set is video read-out." Going one step further, the avant-garde filmmaker and film theorist Hollis Frampton differentiates video from the photographic reproduction of film by describing video's translational potential as "linear notation" because "its whole substance may be referred to in terms of temporality, rhythm, frequency. The video raster itself would seem a kind of metric stencil, *ostinato*, heartbeat." In this 1977 essay, Frampton is referring to video's encoding process, in which all visual information is strung out into a sequence of electronic-turned-magnetic pulses of varying intensities in order to be recorded on the video tape. Seen in this way, Yoshida's turn to video to document his performances appears intimately connected to the contents of the performances, linking the seemingly idiosyncratic pulsations of the electronic musical accompaniment to the linguistic

permutations of the performances through the linearity of language as reinforced by the linearity of the video tape itself.

It is not hard to imagine that Yoshida might be sensitive to these potentials of video. Yoshida was, as previously noted, trained in science and technology, and he had already incorporated video into *EP'3*, his contribution to "Electromagica '69." For this work, he connected a live feed from a video camera near the Sony Building's entrance to a monitor that was embedded into a five-part, electric-wave-driven, automatic kinetic light-and-sound machine. Having



**YOSHIDA MINORU**, *Absolute Landscape #3 (Psychic Revolution)* Featuring *Synthesizer Jacket #2*, Abandoned Hotel, Woodstock, NY, July 28, 1976, 1976, stills from digitized video: 31 min 9 sec. Courtesy Gary Jacquemin, Midori Yoshida, and Ulterior Gallery, New York.

already incorporated a crude switching device between the camera and the monitor to alter the video feed, he was aware of the possibilities video presented, and his text about the concept of *EP'3* indicates a further concern with the media apparatus itself:

The agents of *EP3*, artists suffer aftereffects of the feeble-minded media and the computerized media . . . Artists are shifting their task to communication, using Third Materials produced by all sorts of industries. That's Third Art. In museums, it becomes more and more impossible to show electronic art, light art, kinetic art, and other technology art. Civilization bums of *EP3* lose their place in society and go underground.

By the time Yoshida embarked on his synthesizer jacket experiments in New York, though, he no longer left the machine to control itself, shifting the locus of this revolutionary power away from technology itself and toward the human agents who harness technology in pursuit of communication. Video then appears as a critique of television media: his donning of a bubble helmet on Shinnecock Beach pokes fun at the images of Americans walking on the moon, turning them into a campy farce with his loose ventilation tube, an occasional canine companion and an audience of beer-drinking beachgoers. Technology might get us out into space, and even broadcast those images to us live, but without communication—whether within and across national borders or between humans and extraterrestrials—to what end are we pursuing this expansion?

As I watch and re-watch these videos today, I find in Yoshida's campy sci-fi performances both a warning about the shortcomings of relying solely on technology in the pursuit of human progress, and, paradoxically, an optimism toward the potentials of technology to aid in facilitating communication. Yoshida's New York performances, produced as an immigrant struggling to both make himself understood and make his work legible within a foreign context, remind me that communication is never straightforward or easy, yet the struggle to connect across linguistic divides generates new meanings that enrich our understanding of ourselves and our worlds. At a moment in which technology in the form of social media seems to be creating further linguistic and cultural divides, encouraging factionalization and xenophobia, his work speaks of the dangers of taking a deterministic approach to media. The materiality of media technologies certainly affects the messages conveyed, but they ultimately belie an underlying similarity that we must struggle to uncover.