

Peter
Callas



SOME LIMINAL ASPECTS OF THE TECHNOLOGY TRADE

VIDEO SCREENS VERSUS HORIZON IN TOKYO AND NEW YORK

by Peter Callas

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In 1969 the first person to step on the surface of the moon, an American and apparently a Mason, reclaimed space (and science) from the Soviets live on television. Technology (the future) was again an active myth of American nationalism.

Whatever level you interpret the actions of astronauts Armstrong and Aldrin on the surface of the lunar satellite (the event becomes laden with mystery beyond the 'marvel' of technology when you consider that Aldrin is said to have served himself a special Masonic 'communion' on the Moon and profuse Masonic symbolism surrounds the events, objects and instruments of the Lunar Mission)² they came full circle on the 12th of February, 1986 when the Challenger Shuttle exploded at full throttle. In the intervening two decades the idea of technology in America went from romantic utopian vision to the idea of apocalypse as a spectator sport. From blinding trust to abject suspicion. Vito Acconci, another American video artist (most active in that medium in the 70s) claims that 'wherever it is located, theoretically, art-video is grounded, practically, in America'.³

The reason he gives is that 'getting hold of video equipment... is easier for artists living in America' because America represents the world's 'power-culture'. Concomitantly the artist's choice to 'do' video is 'the privilege of someone who participates in the power-culture'. Ac-

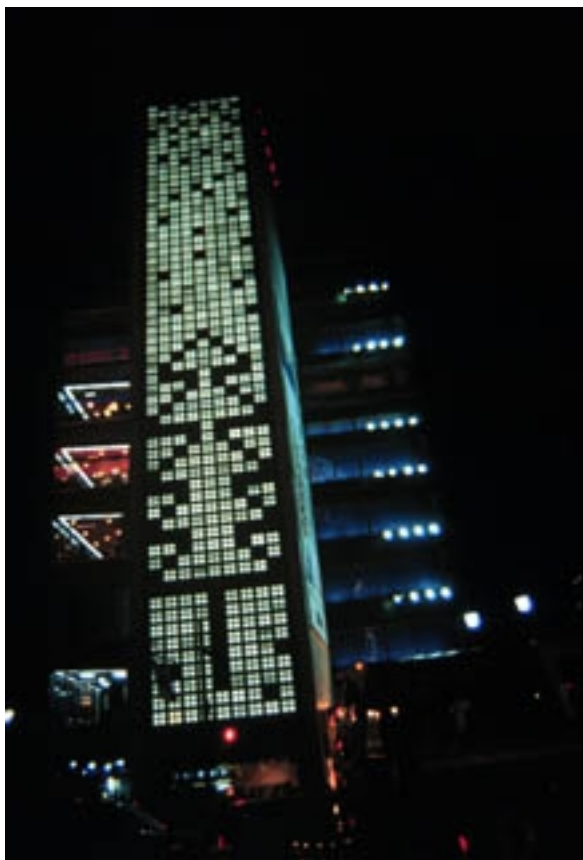
1 essay appearing in *Mediamatic*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 1990 Amsterdam, Netherlands.

2 Michael A. Hoffman II, 'Alchemical Conspiracy and the Death of the West' in: Adam Parfrey (ed), *Apocalypse Culture*, Amok Press. New York.

3 Vito Acconci, 'The Room with the American View' in: ZG, *Altered States*, New York, 1989.

conci seems to be blissfully ignorant of the fact that nearly all of the equipment to which he claims such easy access is not American but Japanese. True, the first documented use of videotape as an art form was Nam June Paik's portapak-made video of the Pope's visit to New York in 1971. Paik however is Korean born and Japanese and German educated and the equipment he was using that day was a Japanese manufactured Sony. There are few American manufacturers of domestic video camcorders and only one or two American brands of television set. MIT'S Media Lab, one of the most advanced academic centres for high-tech research in the United States, is littered with Japanese equipment. The Media Lab's Movies of the Future section's prototype for High Definition Television, built in opposition to Japan's much earlier-developed and therefore more 'primitive' system, is displayed on a Sony monitor.⁴

HIGH NATIONALIST FARCE



Technological nationalism in relationship to television is not a new development. Despite the fact that the development of the world's first public broadcast television system in National Socialist Germany in 1935 depended entirely on shared multinational patents and licenses (for example Farnes AG, one of the two largest television companies in pre-War Germany was founded in part by British owned Baird International Television and Telefunken along with its parent companies Siemens and AEG, operated in part from the Radio Corporation of America license 'System'). the Nazis portrayed the development of television in a nationalistic light concentrated around television's first mass spectacle, the 1936 Berlin Olympics.⁵ Just as the multinational sharing of international patents was strategically kept from public knowledge in the interests of giving the appearance of 'Superiority in trade and knowledge in 1930's Germany. the United States has been engaged throughout this decade in a project which derides the Japanese for their supposed lack of 'creativity' and emphasises American 'ingenuity' in regards

to technological development while much of the actual research, such as at Media Lab, is a cooperative venture. We have returned to an area of high nationalist farce with the developing war over the establishment of a standard for High Definition Television. When Acconci claims that the redesign in recent years of the television receiver from an old worldly hand-crafted looking piece of furniture to a high-tech science object can be attributed to the fact that when 'the American flag was implanted on the moon... science wasn't frightening any

4 For an expanded discussion of the reasoning behind America's belated challenge to the Japanese system of High Definition Television see Stewart Brand, *The Media Lab; Inventing the Future at MIT*, Penguin Books, New York, 1988, pp.73-78.

5 William Uricchio, 'Nazi Television and its Post-war Representation' in: *Wide Angle*. Vol. 11, No. 1, Athens, Ohio, 1989.

more',⁶ he neglects to mention that the redesign of the television set was almost entirely the product of Japanese creative efforts, often in response to specific cultural traits. Think for example of Matsushita Electric's Alpha Tube, designed with the screen facing upward at a slight angle so that it can be watched in a sitting position on a tatami mat, or of Toshiba's 'Personal TV Set' *Specially for Girls* in pastel colours with tiny red hearts mounted on the tips of their antennae. You can't get much more Japanese than that. Japanese too is the almost pocketable Sony Video Walkman which found its way into New York's American Museum of the Moving Image as representing the apex of consumer-based technological ingenuity almost before it was available in the stores. The indented and curved body of the Piedra monitor is designed to be carried easily from room to room and its screen also functions as an ambient light source in three pure colours: magenta, cyan and green. It is rumoured that there are even serious plans to market video 'sun-glasses' which conceivably might not only transmit electronically-treated images of the environment proximate to the wearer but might also carry pre-recorded imagery from elsewhere. In fact the redesign of the viewing medium has gone to such extremes in Japan that the television set as object and the screen as a form of architecture have virtually eclipsed the significance of the image altogether. The image has for most of this decade in Japan been merely the thing that illustrated the hardware and what it was capable of doing. Recent Japanese print advertisements for major Japanese hardware manufacturers are brazenly demonstrative on this point. JVC calls its new BIG GIGA AV-37H1 monitor a *Masterpiece of Television*, and its SVHS HR-S10000 CLIAZ video recorder a *Masterpiece of Video*. Toshiba pictures one of its large television projection units with the caption *Face Reality* in its print advertising. Product designer's are perhaps the true contemporary artists in and of this situation. There is a profuse diversity of ingeniously and elegantly designed technologically-based consumer goods on sale in Tokyo. The fact that so few of these items are available outside of Japan is perhaps in one way an indication of the extent to which the Japanese value the reflexive impression that they are living in the most advanced technological culture in the world. It is not by accident that the new Korean companies which are producing a range of consumer products from video recorders to automobiles which mirror Japanese design are secretly employing top Japanese designers to 'sculpt' their products, to achieve the 'look' of Japanese products.⁷ Japanese television commercials are notorious for displaying an unresolved relationship between the product being advertised and the aesthetic of the commercial. An advertising mural by Katsuhiko Hibino on the side of the Parco store in Shibuya, Tokyo in 1986 illustrates the process by which the image and function of the product is totally subsumed by the aesthetic surface of the ad. The product advertised is a type of caffeine-laden 'hangover cure' which is generically popular amongst Japanese businessmen. This particular brand is called *Americana* but the Matisse-like Basquiat image painted directly on the wall by Hibino (a design 'star' who has his own television program) has no apparent connection with the product (unless you identify 'Some reference to *joie de vivre* in the image and associate that with the product). It is not until you look more closely at the lower left hand corner of the image that you can actually identify what it is that is being advertised. Another hand has painted a photo-realistic representation of the container in which the product is bottled. The same incidental mention of the product name is a common practice in Japanese television commercials. It could be surmised that Japanese advertisers and television executives have come to the highly realistic conclusion that the relationship between television advertising and sales is a fictitious notion which merely simulates the real effects of an actual marketplace like a movie theatre where revenue is accrued directly from ticket sales instead of through the advertising middlemen.⁸ This realisation has imbued a great deal of creative freedom to the artists involved in producing

6 Vito Acconci, op.cit.

7 Unpublished interview with Japanese product designer, 1989.

8 For an expanded version of this argument see Thomas Streeter, 'Beyond the Free Market: The Corporate Liberal Character of US Commercial Broadcasting' in: *Wide Angle*. Vol. 11, No. 1, Athens, Ohio, 1989.

advertising imagery. The commercial can then be conceived of as a 'gift' to the viewer and is constructed as an elaborate fantasy presented for the viewer's 'pleasure'. In his book *America* Jean Baudrillard remarks about the United States that it is purely by its fictive basis that it dominates the world. 'You wonder whether the world (America) itself isn't just here to see as advertising copy in some other world'.⁹ That other world is Japan. The America that is lost to most Americans is reimagined in all its utopian perfection without a trace of irony in the world of Japanese advertising. The West is constantly recontextualised to a point which can be 'understood' as something far beyond the exotic. Western art and western artists become in their incarnation within the frame of Japanese advertising the ultimate commodity: Western Culture - the one attribute of Power which Japan desires but cannot manufacture. So we see the Japanese 'Seeing Andy Warhol holding a monitor which displays colour bars and advertising TDK video tapes, Joseph Beuys labouring through snow-laden woods in the service of Nikka Whiskey, Ray Charles whispering one word, *Parco* (a fashion-oriented 'market store'), and Woody Allen marketing the more enigmatically achievable *Delicious Life*.¹⁰

THE HORIZONTAL CITY

On the streets of Tokyo Tokyoites can see undigestible American new programs in English being streetcast on huge screens for hours on end and images everywhere of places outside Tokyo. All of this is not as you might 'Surmise another example of the unrequired consumption of America culture. Nor is it an example of the type of American cultural imperialism with which the world is so familiar. By displaying the rest of the world in the ambient installations of the streets of Tokyo Japan brings the world to its doorstep and in pretending that this simple act is one of 'knowledge', realises itself to be the central economic power that it has become. If one were to imagine hours of Japanese-language television news streetcast on a daily basis in New York, one could easily imagine New Yorkers feeling threatened by the phenomenon. Architectural writers in the United States such as Glenn Weiss and Raymond Gastil have begun to note the only recent invasion of the video screen into the arena of public architecture in New York City with despair and even puzzlement as to its origins and are keen to foresee its disappearance. Gastil cites the recent failure of Fizzazz on Columbus Avenue on the Upper West Side, a retail outlet for Coca Cola clothes which used touch-screen video monitors as catalogues for its products, as proof of the transitive novelty value of the phenomenon of screens. Not allowing his imagination to penetrate beyond the territorial boundaries of America he ascribes the incursion of screens into the city space to an aesthetic which has been fermenting in the suburban shopping malls of America for a decade. He asks 'if the (publicly displayed) screen is such a natural outgrowth of the car-oriented and malled suburb, what is the screen aesthetic doing on Columbus Avenue?'¹¹ The answer of course is that the screen is the imperative not of the American suburbs but of the world's first great technologically-based horizontal megalopolis: Tokyo. It is only in the horizontal city that the natural horizon disappears. In Manhattan it's always possible to observe the limits of the narrow vertical city from street level (even more so from above); to glimpse the narrow strip of tree-laden cliffs on the Jersey shore or the open sprawl of Queens and Brooklyn. (It is only in the length of the avenues that the imagination is engaged in Manhattan: with the idea that Broadway, still with the same name, ends in another city far to the north). In Tokyo by contrast, where a new cluster of earthquake-resistant grid-immune skyscrapers which are placed like randomly sorted majong tiles in Shinjuku, the horizon is rarely glimpsed. Even from the simulated Swiss Chalet restaurants atop these buildings there is nothing to be seen

9 Jean Baudrillard, *America*, Verso, London and New York. 1988, p.29.

10 *Delicious Life* was a slogan for Seibu Department store in 1982.

11 Raymond Gastil, 'Image and Afterimage: The Screen and Architecture' in: *Metropolis*, Jan/Feb 1989. New York, pp.46-51. See also Glenn Weiss, Edward Leffingwell, 'The Necessity of Walls: The Impact of Television on Architecture' in: *Modern Dreams: The Rise and Fall and Rise of Pop*, Institute of Contemporary Art. MIT Press, Cambridge, 1988.

but the city. It is only in the horizontal city that the electronic horizon has become necessity. The lack of an horizon strangely speeds up the perception of time and creates the illusion (nay the reality) that it is difficult, at least time consuming, to 'escape' the city. Publicly displayed media screens restructure time in erratic clusters and offer the aspect of vicarious escape, inverting day and night but not, interestingly enough, seasons. The ambient screens of Tokyo are strictly tied to seasonal imagery, especially if the imagery is Japanese. (In the case of foreign imagery on the other hand the seasons are often the projection of Japanese stereotypes. Spain, for example, lives in a perpetual Summer.) Ambient images are in no sense documentary. They offer no information about the places in which they were taped. They simply are virtual spaces in and of themselves. Imagine how important these screens will become in the first underground developments, like *Alice City*, which Japan is now planning. Sky space has long been a marketable commodity in Tokyo to get around the *Sunshine Law* which disallows a new building to block a certain percentage of direct sunlight from pre-existing adjacent buildings. (This law, rather than some proclivity for perversely distorted and truncated Gaudiesque shapes amongst Japanese architects, accounts for what might be called Tokyo's 'Sun Sculpture' buildings.) Sea space is already for sale in the form of floating offices in Tokyo Bay and there have recently appeared plans to build over the express-ways in Tokyo which are already built over the pre-existing ground roads and former canals. There is also serious speculation about the possibility of building 'floating' suburbs above the main business districts of Tokyo so that commuters would only need to take an elevator ride home. Underground space will be next - the last? commodity of 'real' territory in Japan. Curiously the plans for these underground developments reflect the design of late nineteenth and early twentieth century technological utopians like the American King Camp Gillette (1855-1932) who, as well as inventing the safety razor, yearned to reshape America.¹²

COLONIZATION OF THE TWO DIMENSIONAL WORLD

Tokyo, unlike New York, is not a self-attracting universe. It is a city which constantly wishes, like Alice through the looking glass, to be somewhere or something else. It especially wishes to be New York. The recent acquisition by Mitsubishi of the Rockefeller Center (incorporating the RCA building: the symbolic 'manger' of television) indicates the extent of this desire. Perhaps the reason that ambient imagery fails to function with the same imperative in New York as it does in Tokyo is that New York, in its arrogance, wishes to be nothing other than itself and in its death tryst with Reality has no use for technological gadgets in any case. Its link to 'reality' is perhaps the reason why the Japanese are so fascinated with it (though Tokyoites would get the same kind of daily confrontation in almost any major city in South East Asia as they do in New York they might miss the element of real, rotten power that New York suffuses). New York is also a city which like many European cities has already begun to function as a museum of itself. Its development is now largely beyond the control of architects who are hampered by heritage zoning laws. In the suburbs of New York like Queens no one desires any longer to have a house any different from any one else's. That's what the Americans used to think about the Japanese. Tokyo is now by contrast like a theatre set which changes appearance almost with the seasons and in the suburbs bizarrely-shaped houses with stained glass windows (intact) directly facing the streets can be spotted. Japan has no tradition of building in stone and Tokyo has suffered many abrupt changes through earthquakes, fires and war, and sees no problem with constantly transforming, or reinventing, itself. Screens play a major role in this 'reinvention'. Japan perceived itself as facing the same drastic shortage of space and the feeling of being locked out of world economic markets in the 1920s and 30s as it has done throughout the 1980s. Much of Japan's pre-War propaganda regarding its incursions into Asia and the Pacific, beginning with the 1894 occupation

12 Howard P. Segal, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1985, p.43.

of Formosa (Taiwan) and ending with the disastrous occupation of Manchuria (called Manchukuo by the Japanese) prior to the War, cited lack of space as Japan's problem and the main reason why it was willing to help in the construction of the so called Greater East Asia Co Prosperity Sphere.¹³ The irony of Japan's defeat in the War is today still paraded before a mute television audience which watches as jumbo jet load after load of aging 'children' who were left behind in Manchukuo as the Japanese fled the Soviets in the last days of the War, present their faces and publicly recount their earliest childhood memories in the hope of being recognised by a relative in that new land, which is just as tangential a colony as was Manchukuo, of *terebi* (television). Each planeload is younger and younger (the eldest had the privilege of going first) and their memories are less distinct (they were babes in arms when the Soviets came). They are now nearly the only visible reminder of the War for Japan and they can be eclipsed with the press of a button. American video artist Tony Conrad argues persuasively (if somewhat tongue in cheek) in his videotape *That Far Away Look* (1988) that the Japanese have been engaged in a process of obsessively transforming the three dimensional into the more manageable two dimensional for centuries. The largest pre-modern project, he argues, was to make flat rice fields in a mountainous terrain. The most recent project has been to turn everything flat so that it (the world) can be addressed - and controlled - through the screen of the monitor. If that two dimensional world could be considered a form of virtual territory the Japanese are not only constructing it, they are actively colonising it. The neo-colonial facets of Japanese brand names and advertising copy for image emitting technology -- Pioneer, Victor (JVC, Japan Victor Company), National and Ricoh's 'Copy Frontier' -- are not merely vestiges of an earlier way of thinking but active metaphors which invest proprietary right to the terrain they label with such persistent centrality. In watching these spaces, in peering through these electronic devices, Western innocents are surveying a terrain which no longer belongs directly to them.

Peter Callas, 1990

13 S. Nakado, *Japan's Problems: Japan-China Facts & Pictures*, Japan Pacific Association, Tokio, 1936, p.26.