

<b>Out of Tokyo</b>		
<b>107</b>		<b>Art and Social Responsibility</b>
		<b>Ozaki Tetsuya</b>

I went to Berlin to visit Germany's biggest media art festival, "transmediale 05". As director Andreas Broeckmann mentions in his text he wrote for our [RealCities](#) page, a number of symposia and lectures were held to give a broad



Mikami Seiko + Ichikawa Sota

overview of the state of media art especially in Asia, which made this year's event particularly interesting. Popular program points included also an exhibition of Mikami Seiko + Ichikawa Sota's "gravicells", and a performance by noteworthy Indonesian artist Venzha.



Haus der Kulturen der Welt, the main venue

Venzha, Tien Woon

(tsunamii.net/Singapore), Sei Keiko (independent curator/Bangkok), Dominick Chen (researcher at ICC/Tokyo) and Shikata Yukiko (curator at ICC/Tokyo) were taking part in a symposium entitled "Art and Social Responsibility". It was moderated by Marie Le Sourd (Asia-Europe Foundation ASEF/Singapore), along with Gunalan Nadarajan (curator/Singapore) as kind of an observer. A little sad is the

fact that due to the large number of participants the 2-hour frame didn't allow for much discussion after each panelist's speech, however it was a highly rewarding event.

There was actually an advance hint at this symposium: a lecture event held at Tama Art University's Kaminoge Campus in October 2004 as part of the Asia-Europe Creative Camp. The event targeting an audience of mainly European



"Art and Social Responsibility" panel

and Asian students was co-hosted by ASEF and Arts Initiative Tokyo (AIT), and featured lecturers Gerfried Stocker (Director of Ars Electronica) and media art critic Kusahara Machiko. The latter introduced works by the likes of Maywa Denki and Kuwakubo Ryota, and classified them as "device art" referring in a positive way to their "playful" aspects. This caused a backlash in the audience, as students responded with comments like, "without a social message there's no art" or "I've been so interested in Japan, but now I'm disappointed".

I was there at the time, and I must say that both Kusahara's generalization and Stocker's comment, "Maywa Denki are criticizing in their works habits of the Japanese industry and society" were statements difficult to go along with. In this sense, I was expecting much from the "sequel" in Berlin this time, but things went into a different direction than I had forecasted.



Venzha's performance

Following introductions by Venzha and Woon of their respective countries' situations, Sei, after clarifying that she "left Japan a long time ago", talked about video and performance art in the early 1970s that often

discussed issues such as the Minamata Disease. She also explained that, without corporate sponsorship, contemporary and media art couldn't have thrived in the '80s, as there was almost no support from national or local governments. After that she mentioned that a friend who teaches media art in Japan once complained that, "today's students are only interested in technology, but don't feel like touching upon

social issues in their works". According to Sei, there are "several reasons for this, such as differences in the conception of art, social structures, and educational systems between Japan and western countries." If you asked me I would add to this list forms of media coverage, but since I've been writing about this several times before I don't want to explain this any further here.

Next in the program was Dominick Chen with a striking lecture. Opening with the words, "I basically agree with Sei-san's pessimistic view, but...", Chen illustrated briefly and easily to understand problems of media art and



Dancer/designer Irene

culture in Japan, in a short yet comprehensive, and very positive speech. He mentioned the "Akihabara cleaning volunteer" project in 2002 as a continuation of Hi-Red Center's "campaign promoting the cleaning-up of the metropolitan area" in the 1960s, and "Korosuna/Do Not Kill" or Tsubaki Noboru's "Kokuren Shonen (UN Boy)" project as recent artistic forms of anti-war appeals. He also explained that there are rather "nerdy" kinds of projects such as an amateur art market opened by Murakami Takashi, whereas the difference between such "otaku" and hackers lies in the fact that the latter are aiming at a Commons sort of "Creative Archive"...



Dominick Chen

The definition of an "otaku" as someone with the "physicality of an animal and the mind of a child" may be founded on critic Azuma Hiroki's analysis, but here it would have required a little more explanation. Seeming a bit too clipped was also the separation and likening of aspects of the Japanese society to the dark and the bright sides of BBS sites, applying reports on the killings of hostages in Iraq on "2-channel", and calls for

disaster relief volunteers and information exchange respectively (Chen must be aware of the positive sides of "2-channel", which in my opinion have to be emphasized seperately). Nevertheless, I believe that the simple accusation of Japanese art(ists) of a lack of sociality requires calm and accurate explanation of the actual state of affairs, neither by

vociferously protesting nor by flatly agreeing. In this regard, both Sei and Chen delivered outstanding speeches.

However, the examples Chen gave belong to a very small number of "exceptions" within Japanese society. From a big point of view, the nonchalance of Japanese toward the outside world (and toward themselves) is a hideous tragedy. I would recommend everybody involved to take the "art and social responsibility" theme and replace "art" with "culture", "business" or "individual", and immerse in further investigation.  
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Ozaki Tetsuya  
Editor in chief  
REALTOKYO  
[ozaki@realtokyo.co.jp](mailto:ozaki@realtokyo.co.jp)