TAKAHIKO IIMURA

is a camera

C.2 - M.1 / C.1 - M.2
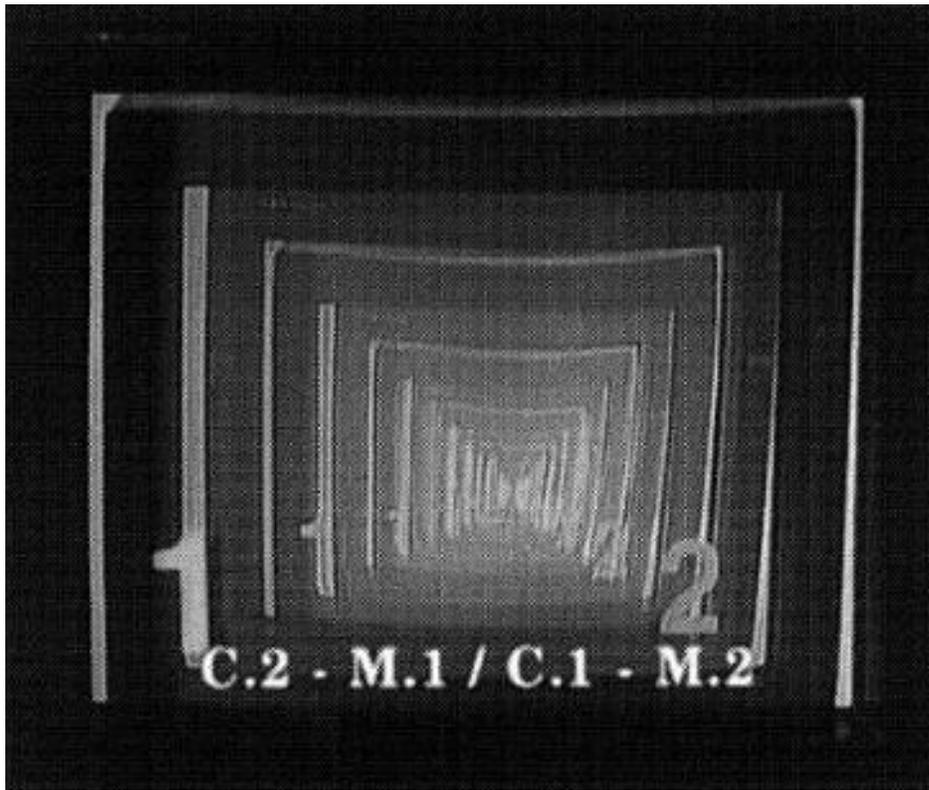
MARTIN ANDERSON
MEDIA MAVERICKS
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Takahiko IImura is the mad semanticist of video art. He hails from the halcyon days of closed circuit filmmaking, when the moving image suddenly possessed the ability to appear the moment it was shot, proliferating from the lens straight to the television screen. This newfound immediacy of image bestowed a self-awareness in the filmmaker that was once lost in cost-effective calculated shots and lab times. Iimura, a technical wizard amongst the impressive lineage of first-wave video artists (Nam June Paik, Joan Jonas), uses the medium to define the vital precepts that govern it. He approaches video as a language to be deciphered: something extraordinarily complex yet nonetheless quantifiable. It is a syntactic limbo where the artist, audience, and the mechanisms that embody the two are at once at odds yet inextricably the same.

While he works in multiple formats (performance, installation, interactive media), the majority of Iimura's work can be defined by a few components elemental to video: a camera, a monitor, and a subject – usually Iimura himself. By stripping video down to its intrinsic parts, he fashions a set of tools that can

easily apply to a language that is equally as bare. If some filmmakers strive to master the epic form, Iimura aims in the opposite direction. He is a virtuoso of the clause, the simple sentence.

The first time I encountered an Iimura work I was met with a blank television screen, massive when stretched over the forty-foot screen of the Japan Society's in-house theater. A hand materialized to flick a switch, precipitating a pair of eyes to illuminate the screen with the word "Seeing" superimposed beneath. The hand emerged a second time to turn off the signal, then again to reveal the same eyes closed - "Not Seeing" emblazoned in the pixelated titles. This process continued several times more: once featuring video feedback with "Seeing", concluding with a blank monitor and "not seeing." It comes across as very precise and methodical; a series of methodical observations in order to better understand the act of "seeing" in the reflexive world of video.

After a succession of mishaps involving antiquated tape recorders and pigheaded restaurant owners, I managed to arrange an interview with the Japanese artist on the patio of a cozy Moroccan café in the East Village. The weather was unseasonably warm and the Coca-Cola was served in chilled glass bottles.

MARTIN ANDERSON: How did you get into filmmaking?

TAKAHIKO IIMURA: Well that was back in the early '60s, when I graduated from school in Tokyo. Before that I was interested in poetry and painting. I found that those were not good enough for me, so after that I found film, specifically experimental film. I was much more interested in the poetry of it than the narrative: from the beginning it was much more about the visuals.

In Japan at the time there

was no cinematheque, no film library, or anything that would show experimental cinema – even the classics. The only thing I could do was read about these classic avant-garde films, so I would have to imagine how they would look based on a descriptions or small photographs.

MARTIN: I've read somewhere that a lot of your early work was based on what you heard about the avant-garde.

TAKAHIKO: That's right. Only a few films came to Tokyo in the mid-60's, a few European films, mostly from the French avant-garde. But before then I had already started making my own films. The first one was called *Junk* (*Kuzu* in Japanese). It was related to what was happening in art, this tradition of "Dada" that started in the 1920's, in addition to my interest in poetry in the visuals of film.

I found a regular 8mm camera that had just come out at the time and I started shooting. I started with shooting all this junk on the beach, and it dealt with what is now called ecology. You have all these industrial garbage, and the film was very much about how to approach the waste. At that time there wasn't a precedent for ecological concern, nobody found the junk as anything more than "just waste."

A friend of who was using junk for his sculptures found this American film intended for sexual education, and it was very descriptive about animals and plants with these photographs and animations. We took it and punched a hole in each of the frames and distributed it as *On Eye Rape*.

MARTIN: This seems a bit similar to what you did in *Onan*, with the protagonist burning holes through pornographic pin-ups.

TAKAHIKO: Yes, *Onan* dealt with this kind of thing, too. "Eye Rape" is an idea that we took from the Old Testament. It was the first "recycled" film that I did, dealing with found footage,

MARTIN: Both pieces are very sexual in theme. Was your intent in creating them in any way a reaction to the sort of puritanical ways in which Japan viewed sexuality and censorship?

TAKAHIKO: That's also true. That's also the basis for another film of mine called *Ai* (Love), where I shot the act of love-making in extreme close-up so you are not able to distinguish between male or female. I only shot a tiny area so anyone who wished to censor it wouldn't be able to figure out what was going on. The novelty was having the sense of actually witnessing it.

Yoko Ono got a hold of that film and she liked it very much so she sang for the soundtrack. She brought it back with her to New York and she showed it to Jonas Mekas, and he gave it a very nice review in the Village Voice. This is why I was able to come to New York.

MARTIN: How did visiting New York have an effect on your work?

TAKAHIKO: I came here in 1966, and I was impressed with Nam June Paik's work at the time, so I got very interested in video as opposed to film. And in 1969 I returned to Tokyo and I started making my first videos.

MARTIN: At what point did you begin analyzing form in your work?

TAKAHIKO: At some point in the early 70's I made *Shutter*, in which I shot into the projector bulb.

MARTIN: This seemed to be very reflective of Tony Conrad's *Flicker,* in which he intercut black leader with white frames, gradually shortening the intervals.

TAKAHIKO: The way *Shutter* was made was very different from Tony's film. It had a lot of fade-in and fade-out processing because I was shooting into the screen with nothing but the projector bulb. It resulted in the shape of the eye, or sometimes the shape of an egg, coming and going with the film's flicker. It was more image-concerned than my later work.

MARTIN: And this was one of your first form-related films? Coming from a poetry background that wasn't necessarily concerned with the mechanics and linguistics of film?

TAKAHIKO: Well that was around the time that I was getting interested in video, too. In 1972 I made my first video, *Blinking*. It was an image of a woman's face, and she was blinking while the video was also "blinking" through scan-lines, the frequencies of the video. Throughout the video they're sometimes increasing, sometimes decreasing, and it quite often had a blinking effect. It was the eye blinking and the video blinking through the scan lines. So this was my first examination of the mechanics of video in cinema.

MARTIN: At what point did you begin to get in contact with some of your major influences.

TAKAHIKO: I encountered Stan Brakhage very early on in Tokyo. A friend of Stan Brakhage came to Tokyo and screened some of the *Songs* series, and I was very impressed. So I made sort of home movie that was in a way influenced by these films.

MARTIN: Some of your work is reminiscent of Brakhage's ideas, particularly his ideas on the "camera eye" and the separation of experienced signifiers from their learned meaning. I found it humorous that in the section you devoted to him in *Filmmakers,* you provoked this idea of signs in the soundtrack by calling out the names of the objects as they appeared on screen.

TAKAHIKO: Well, I was paying a kind of homage to him, too, when I went to shoot at his house in Colorado. But it was also about the environments and these other familiar objects that I have seen. So I decided that I would just pick out some words for what I see, kind of like an English lesson. When you learn English, you name objects. In this way, you make a distance, objectifying the way you look at things. When I got the material I shot, I didn't have an idea about what to say about it. So I just found objects and picked words for them and that's how it was made.

MARTIN: *White Calligraphy* is also something I saw as relating to Brakhage's work in the way it deconstructs language in lieu of creating something viscerally beautiful. I've read that even if you understand Japanese, it is very hard to read because the characters appear and disappear too quickly. Was this a conscious attempt to break down the meaning of language?

TAKAHIKO: Well, it was fascinating how you see these words or characters, which appear too fast to read. Sometimes you can "see" certain words, especially those that show up often like "god" or "life." It was based on a story of god and life in ancient Japan, so it is a part of how Japan and Japanese was formulated.

I have screened that film in many different ways. Sometimes I use it as a performance piece where I will play with the projector by slowing it down four to five frames per second, so you can read it. Sometimes I voice it. Sometimes I draw the characters on a wall following the projection. Sometimes I draw it on myself. There's a kind of Buddhist strategy to writing script on the body.

But in the 1970's my interest kind of splintered from that fascination with image to the form of cinema.

MARTIN: Even though it kinda predates your more formal work, this fascination with semiology still seems to be very apparent in *Filmmakers*. Did the work of the featured artists in this sector of experimental film have any impact on you?

TAKAHIKO: In film semiology, most of the academic material discusses the story and narrative of film. Nothing really discussed the film semiology, especially in experimental film. But these filmmakers were interested in that aspect of film. When I found video, I discovered that there was no study into the semiology of it. So I tried to make my own using the double-feedback system, something that is very particular to video that doesn't occur in film. I found this self-sustaining, self-recycling system of video to be very uniquely self-referential. You can show the feedback through this immediate response system. Not

only are you observing the video, you are also being observed at the same time. So I developed this system in comparison to language, using English. For example, I can say, "I see you", which is very basic in video, but I can also say, "I see you and you are also seeing me" with this feedback system. So in *Observer/Observed*, you can relate to this language through what is shown. I could not only show "I see you", but also "I see you who is shooting me." This set-up not only related the video to the image, but also the video to the whole system.

MARTIN: What do you think is the basis for your fascination with these mechanics?

TAKAHIKO: I think it was the immediacy of video; that you can instantly relate from what you are showing to what you are seeing. Where you normally have a subject and an object, in this response system the relationship between the two is not absolute. You can be a subject and an object at the same time. There has been a long argument about this relationship in philosophy, and in video I saw it as "I, who is shooting; and you, who is shot" where I can be "I" and "you" simultaneously.

I made a piece that was an installation as well as a performance called *This Is A Camera Which Shoots This*. In this case, I used a particular image, "this", that was objective and subjective at the same time. "This is a camera which shoots this, which is a camera that shoots this."

"This Is A Camera Which Shoots This" (1982)

MARTIN: Similar to your *Camera, Monitor, Frame* in which you panned from a camera to a blank wall.

TAKAHIKO: Right. So you have the wall, the object, and the image. And these three are interrelated, showing that the object is different between these concepts. The image is what is signified, so this signifier/signified relationship is somewhat interchangeable. It can go back and forth.

MARTIN: A lot of your work illustrates this parallel between a series of images and a sentence. I've heard that Sergei Eisenstein shared this view; that he was a bit of an influence in your work.

TAKAHIKO: Yes, but I have my arguments with him, too. While his theories on montage were based on the idea of the word as an object, he did not relate them with the larger structure of a sequence of images,
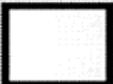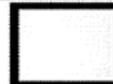
Seeking to illustrate his point, Takahiko pulled out an extremely detailed diagram of his "This Is a Camera Which Shoots This" piece. It's a very comprehensible grid of images and their corresponding overdubbing, length, and sequential order. I remember feeling a bit taken aback over the amount of analytic reasoning and organization Iimura devotes to his work. Below is an example of such a diagram, this one for *Camera, Monitor, Frame*.

Camera, Monitor, Frame

| This is a camera 2 | | | | b/w, sound, 1'04" |

picture plan

	A	B	C	D
picture				
description	wall (white)	camera 2	wall (white)	camera 1
cable connections	C.1-VTR 1	C.1-VTR 1	C.2-VTR 2	C.2-VTR 2

program   title 5" total 1'04"

No		picture	description	voice (dubbed)	min.sec
1	B		camera 2	This is a camera which shoots	11
2	D		camera 1	This is a camera which shoots	16
3	A		wall (white) (pan to B)	This	20
	B		camera 2	is a camera which shoots	23
4	C		wall (white) (pan to D)	This	27
	D		camera 1	is a camera which shoots	32
5	B		camera 2	This is a camera which shoots	37
6	C		wall (white) (pan to D)	This	40
	D		camera 1	is a camera which shoots	45
7	A		wall (white) (pan to B)	This	47
8	B		camera 2	is a camera which shoots	53
9	D		camera 1	This is a camera which shoots	58

⟶ right pan

TAKAHIKO: (On *This Is A Camera Which Shoots This*) There are two propositions. One is "this is a camera" another is "I am Takahiko Iimura.".And these go back and forth to form a kind of visual dialectics. One is positive; one is negative. What I get in the end is "I am a camera", which combines the two. So this is more similar to Vertov than Eisenstein, particularly in his *Man With The Moving Camera*. There is a

segment in it in which there is an image of him carrying the camera, the shot of the filmed object, and then a shot of the lens and the camera eye combined.

MARTIN: And that all was related to the "Camera's Eye" idea that was developing around then.

TAKAHIKO: That's right. But that film was, of course, silent, and I had the ability to involve language. So I could form a dialogue between the camera and myself, the negative and the positive. This is what I mean by visual dialectics.

MARTIN: In a bit of a contrast between these dialectics, a lot of your work seems interested in the idea of two things simultaneously being the same, or the phenomena of simultaneity in video. When I was researching you I came across a quotation by Jacques Derrida that seems to apply to some of your work. "I hear myself at the same time I speak."

TAKAHIKO: That is another concern I have developed, definitely more related with that phenomenology of video, "I am hearing what I am saying." This is much more involved with the voice, and it something that is not discussed in either experimental or narrative film. Traditionally speaking, both are more concerned with visuals. But here I am discussing about the mechanics of hearing and speaking, which is a very important area when you think about it. You have talking – language and spoken word – but I tried to more directly engage the media itself. What this speaking means, what this hearing implies. It has nothing to do with the narrative, but with speaking through the media, that was what I was interested with in pieces like *Seeing / Hearing / Speaking*. While the main concern in it was the "hearing" and "speaking", I added this component of "seeing" into the relationship to see how the three perceptions come together in video.

MARTIN: Some of your more recent work, such as *I Am (Not) Seen* deals with aspects of simultaneity in regards to newer aesthetics. In this particular example, a lot of it seems to involve the relationship between being passive and active.

TAKAHIKO: I have worked with this concept before in different ways, both with positive and negative and being passive and active. Both of these forms intermingle in a way: positive with active and negative with passive, or the other way around (passive is positive), depending on the situation. I, myself, put into these forms something such as "I am seeing as well as hearing at the same time" for something that is very complicated.

MARTIN: These associations, as well as your overarching interest in semiotics, are heavily indebted to the function of language. I am curious how the perception of these video mechanics change between Japanese and English.

TAKAHIKO: Language definitely has an affect on your thinking or perception. For instance, in Japanese we often omit the subject. Instead of "I see you" we say, "See you", avoiding the I. Sometimes English does this to…

MARTIN: But we seem to be concerned with separating the subject with the object through a predicate.

TAKAHIKO: There is a big argument about this in film theory. In cinema, the subject is not always obvious. When you have a shot of an apple, it can be interpreted as "I see an apple" or "There is an apple." So defining what the subject is can be problematic.

MARTIN: Do you ever seek a sense of universality in your work in regards to how it is interpreted by different languages? Do you ever try to build a working relationship between English and Japanese perceptions of video?

TAKAHIKO: I'm not sure if I could say whether my works are universally understood or not, but I try to be understandable as far as language is involved. The cultural origins also make the work exciting. There is a particular concern in Japanese that revolves around the concept of "ma" that I have devoted several pieces to.

MARTIN: That is the concept of "the space between?"

TAKAHIKO: That's right. But it is also the idea that space and time are one, that they are not separated. The sense of "in between" – the sense of intervals – is very much active in Japanese culture, although it is not always obvious. It is sometimes very hidden, it is sometimes not apparent. But it is always working in one way or another. Whereas Western culture always has an emphasis on what is visible, what is identifiable in one way or another. What is objective. So there is always this different sense in perception.

MARTIN: I get the impression that your work that is most based in the essence of film deals with this. *One To 60 Seconds* comes to mind.

TAKAHIKO: Yes, *One To 60 Seconds*, which takes seventy minutes, deals with intervals. It has to do with how we characterize time is different than passively watching something, which is usually $n+1$. Here we have only intervals, so to experience 6 seconds, we have to have an interval of $1+2+3$ seconds.

MARTIN: So it forces you to become aware of the time that is passing between the signifiers denoted on the screen.

TAKAHIKO: Yeah, it makes your life seem much slower *(laughs)*.

MARTIN: I found it odd that you found Andy Warhol to be an influence in your *Filmmakers* piece. He seems to be much more concerned with cultural signifiers, with loaded images and how they pertain to media. You are obviously more fascinated with the language of the media itself. That being said, I felt that *Empire* relates to some of your work in that it forces a conscious of the passing of time.

TAKAHIKO: Maybe. I've only seen five minutes of it *(laughs)*, but it does take a long time. It's a kind of time monument, in that it takes so many hours. But there always is this object. The Empire State Building is always there; it is very concrete. But in the case of *60 Seconds* I only document the time with the occasional number. So in that sense the duration is a different spatial experience.

MARTIN: The difference here kind of illustrates the divergence between Western and Japanese ideas of space, with *Empire* focusing on the building in relation to time and *60 Seconds* the perceived time itself.

TAKAHIKO: I guess so. Yes.

MARTIN: Your vowel piece, *A I U E O NN*, directly addresses the difference in language between Japanese and English. I saw it as how arbitrary semiotics can be considering that their mechanics cannot be transferred between languages.

TAKAHIKO: Well it doesn't have a particular meaning other than its attempt to be very universal. A

very basic element of language is the vowel, in fact Japanese is much more dependent on vowels than English. So we took these and corresponded them with deformed images of myself using a computer program. The vowel acts as a signifier and it is very different as to what it signifies between languages.

There are many versions of this piece, in fact. I used it in performance. I also made a kind of meta-game where in using these words; you can make your own words and get a point. There are about thirty words in Japanese that you can create using these six vowels. It can sometimes mislead you; it allows you to make up your own words. Sometimes it is difficult, but people find it fun.

MARTIN: Do you have any metagames planned for the future?

TAKAHIKO: Lately, not much anymore. In the late-80's, early-90's it was very fashionable, but nobody cares about CD-ROM that much anymore.

MARTIN: So what do you have planned for now?

TAKAHIKO: I have been working on my DVDs, putting my old stuff on DVD. Not only putting my work into a new bag but also redefining and recombining it. So not only creating a new package but also putting new stuff onto DVD.

At this point the almost-outmoded tape recorder I was employing conked out. We continued to discuss Iimura's relationship with his old work, how emerging technologies in media and video advance the medium's malleability. Takahiko, unlike the vast majority of filmmakers, takes advantage of this capacity by reshaping portions of his oeuvre. For example, in *Observer/Observed*, he replaced the male voice of the overdub with a woman's – effectively making the piece more concerned with the actress on screen and effectively doing away with its connotations of command. I commented that I wished that more artists can appreciate their work as something fluidly evolving and with that the interview reached an ambiguous end. Takahiko departed into the toasty afternoon and I remained to enjoy a falafel sandwich.