

Looking Back MJVAX 2010

Introduction

SATO: Everyone, you must be tired from the Malaysian tour. Though a lot happened, let's look back at some of the memorable events. I will explain how and why this tour happened in an appendix, so let's narrow down to sets of episode in Malaysia for now. You can start from the preparation period too.

TAKI: I enjoyed touring with members rarely in one boat even in Japan. Lately, I hadn't been able to put a show in Japan, and for some time we had no chance to work only with video artists, didn't we?

SATO: As it worked out, I think touring with this party was successful. Last year, many artists took part in the presentation for this tour. Selection was finally made with Malaysian side's consideration, or with Naguib's reply, because he was also at the presentation.

When actual itinerary was announced, many practical issues came out, like duration, lecture handling, and as-yet decided things. But we were members capable of divvy up and respond to such matters.

TAKI: Being responsive to troubles is important, isn't it?

SATO: When someone in a team makes some blunder or hasty change, nothing resolves by beefing. For this tour too, I wanted to proceed in friendly atmosphere as much as possible. Though a lot happened this time, I am truly thankful for all responded flexibly.

NAKAZAWA: I regarded you all as "grown up" artists. We were a team that could flexibly to any situation and even enjoy happenings. To put it better, I glimpsed creativity in it.

TAKI: On the exhibition. Showing both installations and single channel works in the same project was a rare case. It's rare even in Japan except exhibition on broad scale. The encounter between Malaysians whose video art will develop from now on, and Japanese, who have kept working on video art in Tokyo, was also interesting.

SATO: We didn't consider ourselves representatives of Japan. We happened to lay a hand on video art at the same period, and thereafter we kept screening video art in Spread Video Art Project and Videoart Center Tokyo. It doesn't represent the Japanese movement, rather we brought individual motivations together and happened to be tied up as an international exchange. It was like a shotgun marriage.

TAKI: That's the best way, I think. When you try to do an exchange like a marriage hunting, you will invite various biases.

HATTORI: I agree. Delivering both installation and screening was nice. Even that didn't start from a purpose, and it wasn't like "we want an exhibition at any cost". Because there was relationship at first, then the exhibition was born as it's extension.

Boundary between art and documentary

TAKI: Though I didn't know a root cause, it was interesting to know that the initial motivator was not video art but Yamagata Documentary Film Festival. We must report this to Ms. Asako Fujioka.

I also found Mr. Sato's position in video art scene is interesting. When Mr. Oe and I had a presentation at 12 art space, Rupesi discussed on topic "Documentary or Videoart?" That time questions flocked to Mr. Oe. "How come did you start from documentary and come to video art?" Because we are familiar with Matsumoto Toshio's works and writings, we understand that both are on the same horizon. We have been thinking our stance was natural, but this project became a good chance to re-verbalize and be reminded of the "Art or Documentary" issue.

HATTORI: Mr. Sato, you also started from documentary making. I remember your first work was a documentary.

SATO: Yes, it was a documentary of a Butoh dancer. Luckily on my case, while I studied video art at university, in the same research room there was a professor studying documentary films. So I could develop my interest in both fields since my early stage.

TAKI: Though, essentially, there is no borderline, in this world they draw a line in between. In my interpretation, actually there are three categories: contemporary art works using video, video art works, and documentaries. But the lines are drawn arbitrarily.

SATO: I feel 60's Japanese artists had less barriers than today. Matsumoto Toshio was no doubt. For Shinsuke Ogawa too, documentary happened to be his exit, but he also directed narrative films. A cameraman Masaki Tamura, Kazuo Kuroki and young Nagisa Oshima were all the same, right? They moved in and out flexibly, as they were experimenting in movie making. Now, there are more walls made by audience against styles. For example, there seems to be preconceived ideas "a video activist means problem conscious documentarist".

Malaysian artists we met this time, they had various problem consciousness on both racial and social issues. Their installations, or single channel works, I suspect, were based on that consciousness. In Japan too, I think younger artists are more open to such ideas.

NAKAZAWA: Speaking of Matsumoto Toshio, he was one of the first people to use the term "EIZOUSAKKA". I think, this definition of an artist title is an original aspect of Japanese video art and film scene and it's very interesting. I referred to this topic in a lecture at USM, too. The technical boundary between video and film today is unclear. In film industry today, it's become usual to use video in their productions. That is to say a meaning of titles "film-maker" and "video-artist" is becoming indefinite. In such a situation, I think, the time has come to reconsider "what we are doing". I was impressed that Sharon responded to this topic, and I realized that other Japanese members has been actually using the title "EIZOUSAKKA" for themselves in Japan.

TAKI: Viewers define aside from artists' stance. Like, this person is not an artist but an activist. Mass media follow them because it's easier to introduce. Critics and their stances are important as well, only few observes art scene multilaterally. Ms. Saito, how did you see this event?

SAITO: I aware there are boundary problems within contemporary art. I felt this event in Malaysia was precisely a moment when such boundary melted. If I think of a couple of reasons why such was accomplished, firstly it would be because all artists faced with each other open-mindedly, and secondly because the hosting frameworks were open at both in Malaysia and Japan.

TAKI: That was, probably because main three (Sato, Hattori, and Tanaka) had gradually *Malaysianized*.

HATTORI: Were we *Malaysianized* insidiously?

TANAKA: Frankly, I think the audience couldn't tell such boundaries. If works were on a monitor, they felt like watching a TV program.

SAITO: I think there was synchronicity among artists. Though they took different stances, I sensed common awareness that they make video works in this era.

TAKI: I had no chance to look at everybody's work recently.

HATTORI: I was glad that Ms. Nakamura completed her latest work in KL.

NAKAMURA: Let's talk about it bit later.

Official Ceremony

TANAKA: Speaking of hosting frame work, I enjoyed the official ceremony.

TAKI: Me too.

NAKAMURA: I vividly remember the official ceremony. As if it were the main event. "Official event is very important." This was the message I got.

SATO: You mean specifically the opening reception at National Art Gallery, and as well welcoming ceremony at UiTM lecture. Right? They were certainly shocking.

I suspect Naguib had an intention to register this event as an official Malaysian event. For us, having a show at N.A.G was indeed thankful, but rather we were hoping the event to be held at a gallery or free space in town. Because Naguib played up with political aspect of Malaysia, I think he considered that the event would be more recognized by going through formal protocol at N.A.G.

NAKAZAWA: For long time, i have been thinking our activities were "underground" (laughs). But in Malaysia we were introduced as major artists. I enjoyed that gap.

TAKI: Since there were many press people, I want to know how we were introduced. You want to see the published materials, don't you?

SATO: I asked for a copy, but it hasn't arrived yet. How about the radio recording?

HATTORI: Ms. Nakazawa and I were featured on a radio program. We talked with Richard Bradbury of BFM radio. Though I made a pitch with all my might..., i haven't got a copy yet.

NAKAZAWA: In fact, that is true. I guess he forgot to...

MMU

HATTORI: One hour bus drive from KL, there is a city named Cyber Jaya, where IT companies are attracted in bulk. Multi Media University is located in the city and Siew-wai works there. Mr. Tanaka talked at this university because students there were mostly majoring in animation.

TAKI: How was students reaction?

TANAKA: Their understanding of animation is that it is something drawn by hand in sheets. I was told beforehand that my target audience would be students learning animation. So I brought classic animation works too. Those works by Georges Schwizgebel and Norman McLaren. Including my animation works, I presented them in two groupings: “drawing” and “stop-motion”. At the end, I showed a piece made by BLU, an Italian graphic team. They drew directly on street walls and roofs and made it into stop motion animation. Its scale was so big. After showing this, Siew-wai told me that the contrast was very good, because just before my talk students took a classic animation class that defines “animation was drawn by hand in sheets”.

TAKI: It means the diversity was obvious, doesn't it?

TANAKA: Students themselves categorized in that way too. I was not sure they just didn't know, or didn't want to know. For example, there is a Malaysian animation, like Wong Hoy Cheong's “dog hole”, that combine live-action and animation. I love such piece, so I wonder if they have watched it or not.

HATTORI: But students showed practical face as well. They raised questions like, “can you live on making experimental pieces?” Or “What does ‘gazing’ mean in Mr. Tanaka's context?” Those that Mr. Tanaka was muddled up to reply.

TANAKA: I didn't tell them concepts of my art practice. But topic shifted to relationship between “vision” and “gazing”, I was surprised so that I replied “why do you know my concepts?” Might somebody handed out written materials?

ART SCENE in Malaysia

SATO: What kind of impression did you have, Mr. Oe?

OE: For one thing, I was delighted by hospitable welcome by all on-site. Even when I arrived in Penang, Wenning Cha of N.A.G. picked me up at the airport. My first impression was that I was taken care of in various ways.

SATO: That maybe because Naguib made this exchange as formal event by including N.A.G. That was his achievement.

OE: Naguib helped me a lot in setting up my installation. And I appreciated it very much.

NAKAMURA: At the end, he came to KL airport and said that he was sorry about not being able to do much as he wanted to.

TAKI: It seems that Malaysian side was not a monolithic.

NAKAMURA: But all other artists said, all the while they didn't know each other well, so they were happy to work together for MJVAX.

SATO: It seems there were many problems on Malaysian side. But with this string of events, artists who didn't work together before became a team. I think that is one of accomplishment. It seems our intermediation triggered it as well.

They spent time in Tokyo as if in a training camp. And they become the nucleus of this time. They were a team and not divided in a group of Malay or Chinese. That was interesting for us, and seems like it was new for them as well.

OE: On Malaysian works, beginning with Nur Hanim's piece, they were very straightforward. Though the most difficult piece was Nur Hasnul's, I wanted to find more like his that are incomprehensible. When I toured galleries in KL, I found most of them very straightforward.

NAKAZAWA: In my impression, Malaysian installations told me very clearly. In the video of Nur Hanim's, a woman tries to tell something, but she can't or isn't allowed to verbalize it. I suppose, it is a piece about a female situation in Islamic society. It's possessed by something like looming psychokinesis but also very elegant piece. In Hasnul's piece, I feel his own struggles. While he pays his respect to society, circumstance, tradition and all that nurtured him, yet he is still bounded by them. And also I see difficulty and toughness of living with such a contradiction. But those elements were put together into a very simple and beautiful form, this was very impressive. However, I noticed that it was his piece after I had came back from Penang... I regret that I lost a great chance to question him in detail.

NAKAMURA: Were there some traditional paintings?

TAKI: There were places showing works of such category, like traditional crafts. I felt many things were jumbled up in the contemporary art scene, including copies of existing artists. Maybe, such genres are divided too much in Japanese art scene, aren't they?

SATO: We also watched young artists' works in Penang. I think those were jumbled as well. Like, some do ink-wash painting, some was extremely abstract, some did graffiti, I had an impression that various influences were directly visible. They were like a graduate works exhibition of an art academy. They were like an exhibition that gathered all juvenile expressions.

NAKAMURA: USM museum had a such great diversity. It really got to me. I loved *astro-room*. Hasnul told me he wanted to deal with both science and art. Its homemade-looks added more charm. There were everything from fossils of early man to a space ship.

HATTORI: By completing rooms under expansion last year, the gallery grew even bigger.

SATO: I get emails from the museum once in a while, and they focused on kids program as well. I find their concept very amusing. They invited children to the university and tour the museum.

HATTORI: When we visited, groups of students were laying down and collaborating. Though it was an university class, I remembered it well. They use the museum not just as an exhibition space but also as a work space.

SATO: On big piece of paper, students drew their own past and future.

TAKI: It must be functioning as a local community center.

HATTORI: That can only be accomplished with Hanul's leadership. Young staffs were like busy bees.

SATO: Between Hasnul and staffs, they had close kinship, like a boss and his henchmen. At the lecture hall, though staffs already prepared 200+ chairs beautifully, with his one voice, they took them all away. He said students would defocus quickly if they sat on chairs.

HATTORI: We entered the hall for preparation and were discussing placement of our chairs. Because the layout had very university like formal feel. So, I asked Hasnul about usual seats arrangement, he told me "if students sit on chair, they will last only for 20 mins." And while we were having lunch, all chairs were gone. I was sorry for staffs, but they did it so quick.

NATION and Regulation called Malaysia

SATO: What kind of impression did you have, Ms. Nakamura?

NAKAMURA: Because I went Malaysia without prior knowledge, I was expecting a condition more similar to Indonesia. (The two have similar language.) But actually, but no wonder, it was quite unique, and I was surprised in many ways. Well to start with what would it be...

It was totally unmixed, beginning with Malay and Chinese, I just felt like they lived apart from each other. Thus, it was incredibly multi-lingual society, and I found it very interesting. Siew-wai and Sharon could speak 4 to 5 different languages, and I heard that typically people could speak at least three. So among Malaysians, they chose one language according to their speech partner: like one to speak in English, Beijing, or Malay. First I thought this condition was bipolar of ours in Japan, but by contraries, I felt maybe this was similar because in Japanese language we also change first person, second person, and honorific according to a speech partner.

When Siew-wai told me "We don't think in one language. We try to get answer in different language. Thus, we can't master any one language," it was striking for me. But it also made me think about Japanese language.

NAKAZAWA: I agree. I had mixed feelings by watching a society divided into each race. I had heard that it was a mixed-race nation, but wasn't actually. Though it is coexistence maybe, they live separately. Also, the language situation was interesting. I wondered, how could their thinking progress? In which language? I asked this question to Sharon, and she said with laughing "Yeah, I wonder, too." On the other hand, this situation could be a big hint for me to live in a circumstance where I don't speak my mother tongue, Japanese daily. Now I've got a confidence about my actual condition.

SATO: I also thought about relation between regulation of country and people living. In Japan as well, beginning of Meiji government, from our religion to life guidance, new

regulations were issued that drastically changed our life styles. But in reality, they did not penetrate through all local areas. There were people living with their own rules. We visited demolished Pudu Prison, didn't we? A market near by was amazing. Though the national religion of Malaysia was Islam, in the market vigorous Chinese people were selling pork, duck, and fish, all together. Opening meat side by side. There were big Buddhist temple, Hindu temple, and Church in each racial neighborhood. I found such coexistence was interesting.

TAKI: Historically, there was a major racial struggle. There is a censorship to hide these histories. I don't know specifics of the censorship, but I guess they censor issues like racial problems and prostitutions. I think the government worries another confrontation may break out by problems become public.

HATTORI: Advocating "one malaysia," Sharon's dad was preaching Masnoor "I respect you, but an artist must have no taboos, and must initiate a change!" Sharon was rattled and defending Masnoor, as a friend.

SATO: He achieved a restaurant franchise in one generation, and throughout his carrier he has been facing this as a real problem. "Our problems won't be taken as a national problem." "It will be turned into Chinese problem," "Please resolve them within Chinese society", such climate may still exist today.

Possibility of Collaboration

NAKAMURA: How was Malacca, though I couldn't attend?

TANAKA: I exercised in my performance with newly developed application "Xavieriser".

HATTORI: Previous night, including Mr. Sato, three of us had a discussion. And concluded "It can't be the same as the KL performance. Tomorrow, Mr. Tanaka must do something new." Well then, he started to think of new video application.

NAKAMURA: Why "Xavieriser"?

TANAKA: Because I was in Malacca.

HATTORI: Easy. There was St. Xavier Chapel.

SATO: Including Tokyo event last year, Mr. Tanaka did most of collaborative works with Malaysian artists.

TANAKA: At the time of Tokyo, I was very conscious about doing it "right". We discussed on themes beforehand, had an outline, then we met and worked together. We had enough material gathered based on individual concept. That was more acceptable.

I am not saying this time was "not right". Though we agreed on "do things together", elements in the improvisation were too much. Also in performance this time, nothing was decided beforehand.

NAKAMURA: Using Illustrator in real time was also an improvisation?

TANAKA: Though I didn't tell them, I made up my mind beforehand. Do things I never have done before. I was lucky to take part in two different performances.

NAKAMURA: You didn't use a video camera that Naguib prepared.

TANAKA: I used it in the 2nd one. I only had a brief dialogue with Kamal in the bus on the road. I was thinking what to do after that. Actually, I had little materials for the performance in my laptop.

NAKAMURA: I enjoyed a video made with Illustrator. Do you think audience knew you are drawing on the location?

TANAKA: I guess they knew.

SATO: I think the relation between dance and other elements is pretty difficult.

NAKAMURA: Dance, video, music and voice, with such various elements, it must be difficult.

TANAKA: It's difficult, when only elements been placed in unfocused condition.

SATO: Each artist can do something. But, "react to what?" Even an improvisation needs an outline. So Kamal's performance was, because his core was music, everybody could react and focus.

NAKAMURA: I thought, Mr. Tanaka's decision, not to shoot dancers, was interesting.

TANAKA: At first, I had an idea using it as my source video, but I decided not to during the rehearsal.

SATO: I think improvisation will go wrong when each participant becomes overconfident. Like expecting someone will give me a cue, or I am giving it. When such balance go off the track, it will go wrong. I think at least a track is necessary.

TAKI: I think improvisation is especially difficult for a dancer. Though a musician can see and hear what's going on on a stage, a dancer can't. He has now fixed view points on stage. So he relies on his own method, then he tends to do his routine.

NAKAMURA: One alternative is make dancers the focus of a performance.

HATTORI: Near the end of Kamal's performance, someone suddenly started to dance in audience seats. His unexpected movement was interesting to me. Though I was surprised at first sight, watching him for a while, I figured he was actually a dancer. I think Kamal's stage had such clear structure.

TANAKA: If you have a clear structure, then some can get off track from the stage.

SATO: I think improvisation is something like a "fracture". It has a form, but there are also parts almost broken, and anyone can break it anytime, in anyway. Such has been staged, anybody can start to drift.

TAKI: You can think that way because Kamal's performance was mostly music.

NAKAZAWA: Hmm. I was not inclined to improvisation, but I am attracted and interested in it recently. So all performances were very helpful for me. I learned a lot. Thanks for the instruction!

HATTORI: Talking about improvisation, I started to think our tour was improvisational overall.

NAKAMURA: Wonderful wrap up!

SATO: Well then, Mr. Hattori please wrap up beautifully.

HATTORI: I was at ease throughout this tour. Looking back in the past, I tried to do too much by myself, and bobbed up and down. But this time, both Malaysian and Japanese members contributed in various ways, and I guess that worked very well.

TAKI: Regarding to exhibition and screening, I think we should have asked for more. Like DVD was not playing right, or screening schedule was not set. Considering our relationship from now on, I think those were things we should let them know.

SATO: It was not clear to whom National Art Gallery was presenting MJVAX. I had an impression the exhibition was held for those involved, and not so much for the audience. "If the official opening was done right, everything is OK!", so I felt. I regret that I should have planned an extended screening program. In it, somebody talk after each screening program. By doing so, N.A.G. might have given a bit more efforts on our screening program as the hosting organization.

HATTORI: When we arrived in KL, we should have arranged a time to meet and have lunch with all staffs involved in MJVAX. We were not in relationship to let them know what our exchange was all about.

SATO: It was even better if we could make "let's do it together" atmosphere. I guess whole picture of this event was not infiltrated enough among the gallery staffs.

Though there were so many happenings. We must thank all the Malaysian artists who put their efforts despite their busy days, and Mohad Naguib Razak and Hasnul J Saidon who arranged events and lectures, and Kyoko Kugai who took care of us for almost entire duration of the trip.