Commentary

Video

Contemporary Video Art in Japan

One of the surprising associations one finds myself making recently is between the video store and the art gallery. Most of the major department stores in Japan have a video gallery for their own in-store video store. These galleries are not pseudo-galleries but important and established centers for circu-
lation and even art. The video gallery in a branch store centers of Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and other large cities these galleries visually display traditional and "modern painting" by regional artists. At Sendai department store in Tokyo, Gallery 200 has been the host to both video and film exhibits and festivals and is a good place to see experimental work in both media.

Another excellent facility, which until April of this year functioned as one of the few regular viewing spaces for video, was JCS Plaza, the Japan Intercultural Com-
munication Society. Curator of their video program, Michael Goldberg, ran a monthly Friday evening screening featuring video artists. It was through JICS programs that I was able to get a view of the world being done in video. This program was just one of the Society's many activities. It was unfortunately curtailed this year for bud getary reasons. The program which was one of the few intercultural forums in Japan was curtailed because of the obvious ease with which foreign artists can penetrate the "art world" which they struggle to be recognized in their own country and do not always find a warm reception in the West. However, in spite of this undertaking of dissatisfaction, such topics are not brought out directly in conversations but the feelings are conveyed in public debate. There is one video gallery in Tokyo devoted to the art form. It is video gallery SCAN, run by artist Fujiko Nakaya. It is a small, intimate space where video and performance art works can be seen. In addition, SCAN holds semi-annual spring and fall exhibitions focusing on different video artists. The gallery is also a video art distribution service in Japan. Also in Tokyo, the galleries Maki and Tamura continue to include video in their regular exhibition program. These galleries however fall into the category of rental spaces which cost the artist the rental fee and sometimes the cost of equipment rental. The expenses involved in showing work and the costs of producing a video are too onerous to the difficult for many younger artists to make.

Aretsy Xergos Yonymos lives in the small coastal town of Fuku, on eight hour train ride from Tokyo. Yonomyos was one of the first artists in Japan to work in video. The first exhibition of his video work was at Gallery 16 in Kyoto. He has since shown his work internationally and received much support from Sony. Yonomyos works on his tapes at his home where he is also a high school teacher and a farmer. He is one of the most versatile artists with whom I had the pleasure to become more familiar. He has also been an impor-
tant figure in the development of video art in Japan. Yonomyos's choice of video as an expressive form has to do with his interest in exploring the ideas of space and interval. He uses the Japanese terms "ma" and "ji" to describe these concepts. In a screening held at JCS Plaza recently he talked about the notion of spatial division in Japanese visual aesthetics as having a strong affect on his perceptions of space and the division of spaces and divisions between ourselves and others or ourselves and our environment. He used, as an example, the Japanese straw mats, "tatami," and traditional Japanese architecture which determine the size of a room by the number of mats used. He also talked about the use of the "tatami," a traditional paper screen, as an ar-
ditional device for visually and psychologically enlarging an enclosed space so that an exterior space is made to feel like one that is interior. He spoke about the Japanese tendency to integrate natural forms such as mountains and lakes into the daily visual scene by minimizing them in the form of game of rocks and plants and other objects which can be used in his video work. His film takes the form of a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. In November of 1982 he met Mako Iidatsu and her video tapes at JCS Plaza. Mako Iidatsu is an award winning experimental filmmaker and video artist who has been working with video since 1974. She lived in the United States ten years and began making tapes after she returned to Tokyo in 1972. Much of her work has been described as "feminist in nature, the terminology has a political ring which does not seem to predominate in most of her work. Her interests center around exploring aspects of women's lives and their conscious and unconscious behavior. Her films seem to be largely non-narrative yet they have an internal structure which can be related to since it is a device that holds the pieces together. In her tape Another Day of a Mauveaule, she creates a fictional video diary of a woman going about her daily activities both before and after being watched by an ever-present eye on a small TV set. The eye seems to func-
tion as a metaphor of the place of the individual in society. Her responses to other people are minimal as if composing the tape, the third person of the woman in the tape, in a curiously way the artist succeeds in establishing an empathy between the viewer and the woman. In Shadokk, a Jewish term for which this tape is named, Iidatsu deals with the theory of "the dark side our character which we usually pro-
ject onto others don't we like the same sort.

Kou Nakajima has been working with com-
mits of technology as an artist since the mid-sixties. He is known internationally for his video "Animagic Cyc," incor-
porating film animation techniques with video special effects. His two-hour video tape, My Life, documenting his mother's funeral and his daughter's birth was included in the 1979 Video from Tokyo to New York exhibition. The screening was organized by Barbara London. And recently as an artist-in-residence at the Western Front in Vancouver, he finished his tape, "Mendake, both a document and a perfor-
mance of the creation of a giant mandala from 200m of colored and black-and-white film," works, whether autobiographical or stem-