

Ko Nakajima: Video still from Mt. Fuji, 1985.

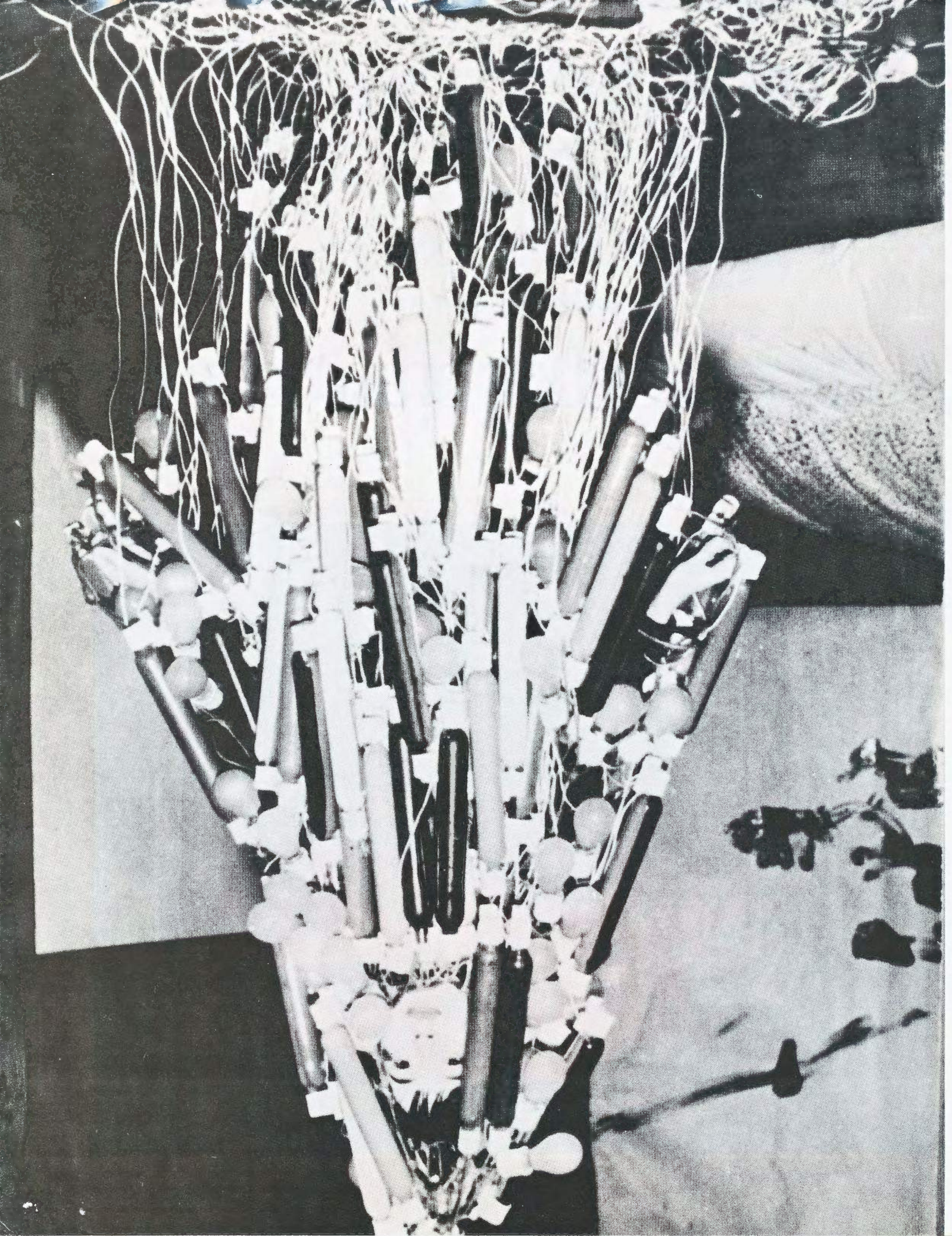
Electronic Explorations

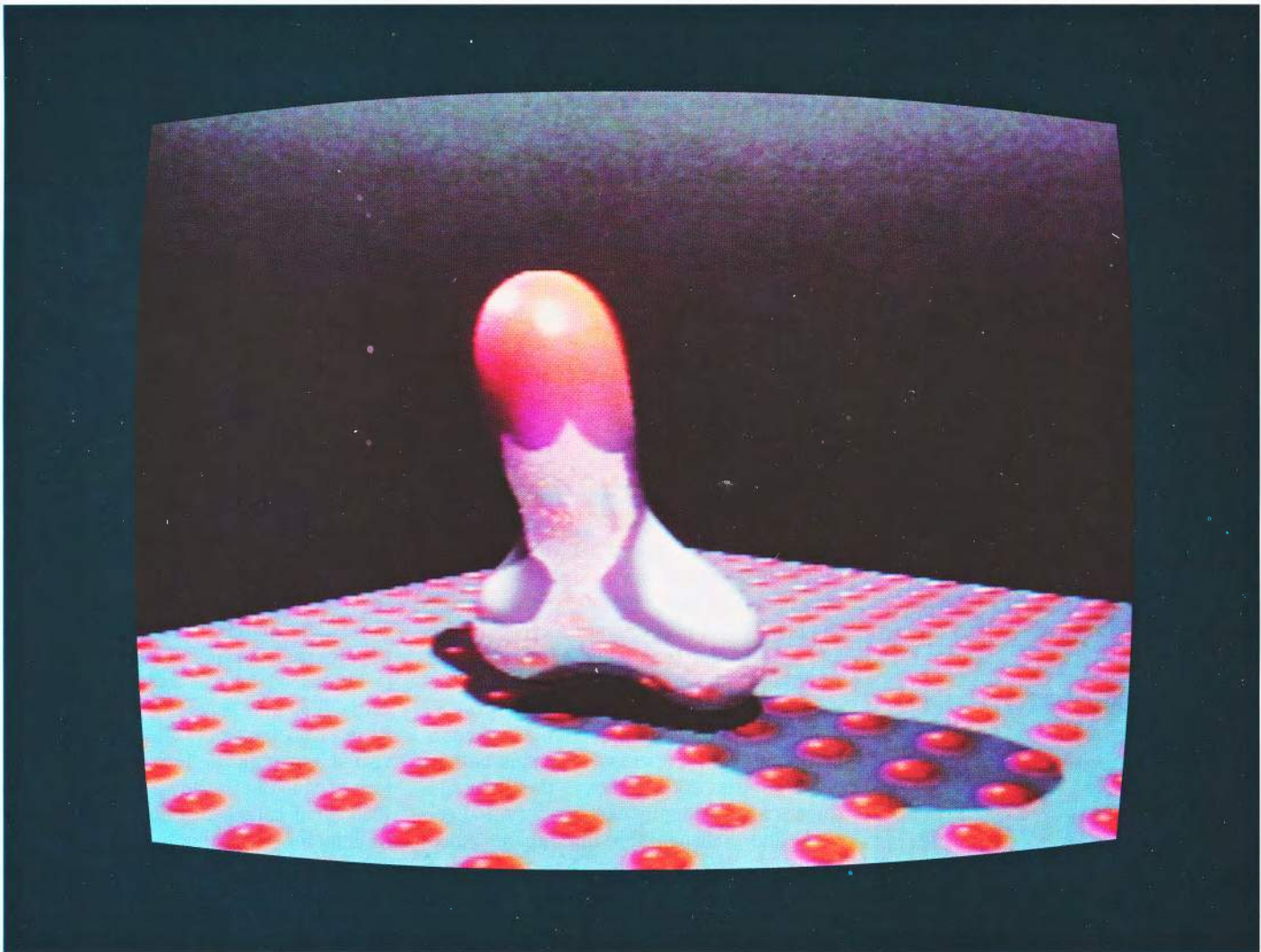
BY BARBARA LONDON

One might suppose that artist-made video would thrive in high-tech Japan, where consumer electronics have become indispensable parts of the social landscape. But this is not the case. Video limps along, subject to logistical and conceptual impediments.

Although many Japanese artists have been experimenting with video over the last two decades, they have been constrained by the expense of making art with electronic materials and the difficulty of finding an audience. In Japan, government cultural

support is still largely restricted to the traditional art forms. And so far, the electronics industry has offered only modest and occasional assistance in the form of donated equipment, scholarships or festival sponsorship. Exhibition opportunities are far more limited than in North America or Europe, where video has found a support network of sorts. Compared with their Western peers, Japanese videomakers are on their own. They operate in a "twilight zone" between the fine arts and the commercial world, and





Masaki Fujihata: Video still from *Maitreya*, 1984. Photo Kira Perov.

Though Japanese videomakers lack a support system and regular exhibition opportunities, they have produced video art in a surprising variety of styles ranging from the satiric to the lyric. Most notable are those hybrid works that fuse video installations with performance art.

their works lack both the prestige of conventional art objects and the profit of entertainment products.

A further obstacle to the development of this art form is the prevailing conception of the nature of art in Japan. Long-established conventions still hold sway, and many artists, even those using contemporary mediums, produce anodyne works that soothe rather than challenge the viewer and seem vapid and cloyingly sweet to Western eyes. In general, the video field is not as highly

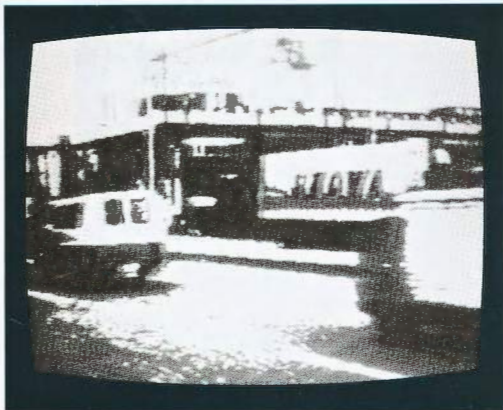
developed as in the West. Still, video is shown in festivals, in artist-run centers such as Tokyo's Video Gallery Scan and Image Forum, and occasionally in art museums. The Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo has included video work by young artists in its prestigious Annuals for the better part of a decade, and the National Museum of Modern Art in Osaka has been developing a video collection.

There are a handful of Japanese artists who work primarily in video and make

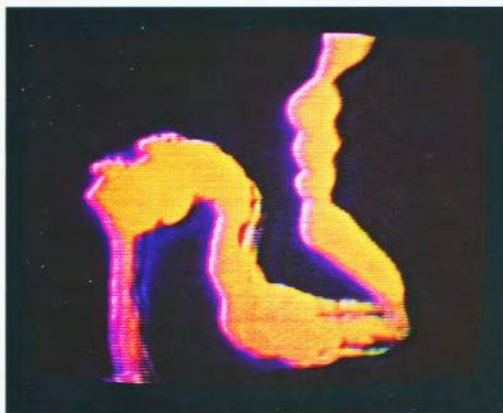
impressive works. There are also several provocative multimedia artists who make use of video. This article will discuss, in addition to art videos, the work of a performance group that uses video both as a set and as a narrative device, and the work of a filmmaker who exploits video for the sense of immediacy it brings to film.

For the most part, the modern arts of the West, including photography, came to Japan during the second half of the 19th

Video technology permeates Japanese life. It is used by hobbyists, by makers of video-commercial billboards, and for visual Muzak in waiting rooms. Videotape is as common as wooden chopsticks.



Katsuhiro Yamaguchi: Video still from Ooi and Environs, 1977. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.



Keigo Yamamoto: Video still from Human Body Energy No. 3, 1984. Photo Kira Perov.



Still from Fujiko Nakaya's black-and-white video Friends of Minamata Victims, 1972. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art.

century, along with foreign concepts of science and industry. Photography was at first subsidized by the wealthy, who sought portraits of themselves or of courtesans, and by foreign merchants who craved souvenir images of a novel culture. Symbolic of Japan's swift adaptation of industrial and artistic practices from abroad, the early photographs combined a new Western technology, devoid of tradition, with the local esthetic conventions of printmaking, literature, journalism and advertising. Photographic images were, on the one hand, connected to the old poetic vocabulary of *ka-cho-fu-getsu* (flowers, birds, wind and moon), which was suitable for pondering the beauties of nature and its cycles of life and death. And they equally reflected the traditions of the Japanese advertising world, a boisterous realm of loud hucksters and of garish banners that were attached to market stalls lining crowded temple paths.

During the 20th century, the versatile camera arts gradually came to seem indigenous and indispensable in Japan. Video technology, in particular, has penetrated daily life to an extent unheard of in the West. Not only are taxis, trains and doctors' waiting rooms equipped with TVs showing the news and visual Muzak, but billboard-size video projections of soft drink and clothing commercials that seductively sell a "life-style" light up thoroughfares in major urban shopping and nightlife districts, such as Tokyo's Shinjuku. Videotape has become as common and as disposable as wooden chopsticks. Video figures in both the entertainment domain of popular television culture and the leisure world of hobbyists. Today's young artists, who have grown up in a media world, may begin their careers by mimicking the styles of the electronic milieu of video games, music video and animation, or, succumbing to the lure of fame and fortune, they may work in the entertainment video field itself.

While Sony and Japan Victor Corporation have occasionally sponsored workshops, festivals or other video events, for the most part they and related corporations are interested in the artistic applications of their hardware only if it will generate broader acceptance of their own technologies. They have commissioned some of the more commercially inclined video artists to make

slick product-launching presentations for international trade shows, but they have supported very little else. Some of these highly successful electronics and camera manufacturers, however, have been working with such prominent filmmakers as Peter Greenaway and Wim Wenders, hoping to develop new applications and to establish a favorable image of being stylishly up-to-date. So far such corporate interest has yielded only minimal benefits to serious video artists. Canon recently launched its Artlab workshop to support new electronic art—and to encourage artists to use Canon equipment. Although the company has not yet settled all questions of copyright and marketability for workshop projects, Artlab is a start for corporate support of contemporary work, and if it is a success other corporations are likely to follow suit.

When the first portable video equipment appeared on the consumer market in Japan in the mid-1960s, a few artists were immediately drawn to experiment with it. Their formal approach was generally influenced by the techniques of avant-garde film and especially by the work of Peter Kubelka and Michael Snow, who visited Japan during that time. But the history of video in Japan really begins with a 1968 event called "Say Something Now, I'm Looking for Something to Say," organized in Tokyo by the critic Yoshiaki Tono along with Katsuhiro Yamaguchi, an artist still working in video today. Yamaguchi had long been interested in new media: in the early '50s he covered his paintings with lenses that turned them into refracted images that shifted as the viewer moved. Beginning in 1971 he applied this treatment to video monitors. A year or two before that, Taka Iimura began making video performances that analyzed the relationships between subject and viewer and between live and recorded action. His works consisted of statements and actions overlapping identical statements and actions on a prerecorded tape.

But video production was sparse until 1972, when Canadian video artist Michael Goldberg, on a four-month stay in Japan, helped to organize an exhibition called "Video Communication: Do-It-Yourself Kit." Many of the Japanese artists involved in the show joined together that same year to form a group called Video Hiroba. These artists came to video from painting, sculpture, experimental theater and cinema, as well as from music, photography and graphics. Many of the early experimenters were "disfranchised" people—dissident art students, including many women.

The 13 members of Video Hiroba, among

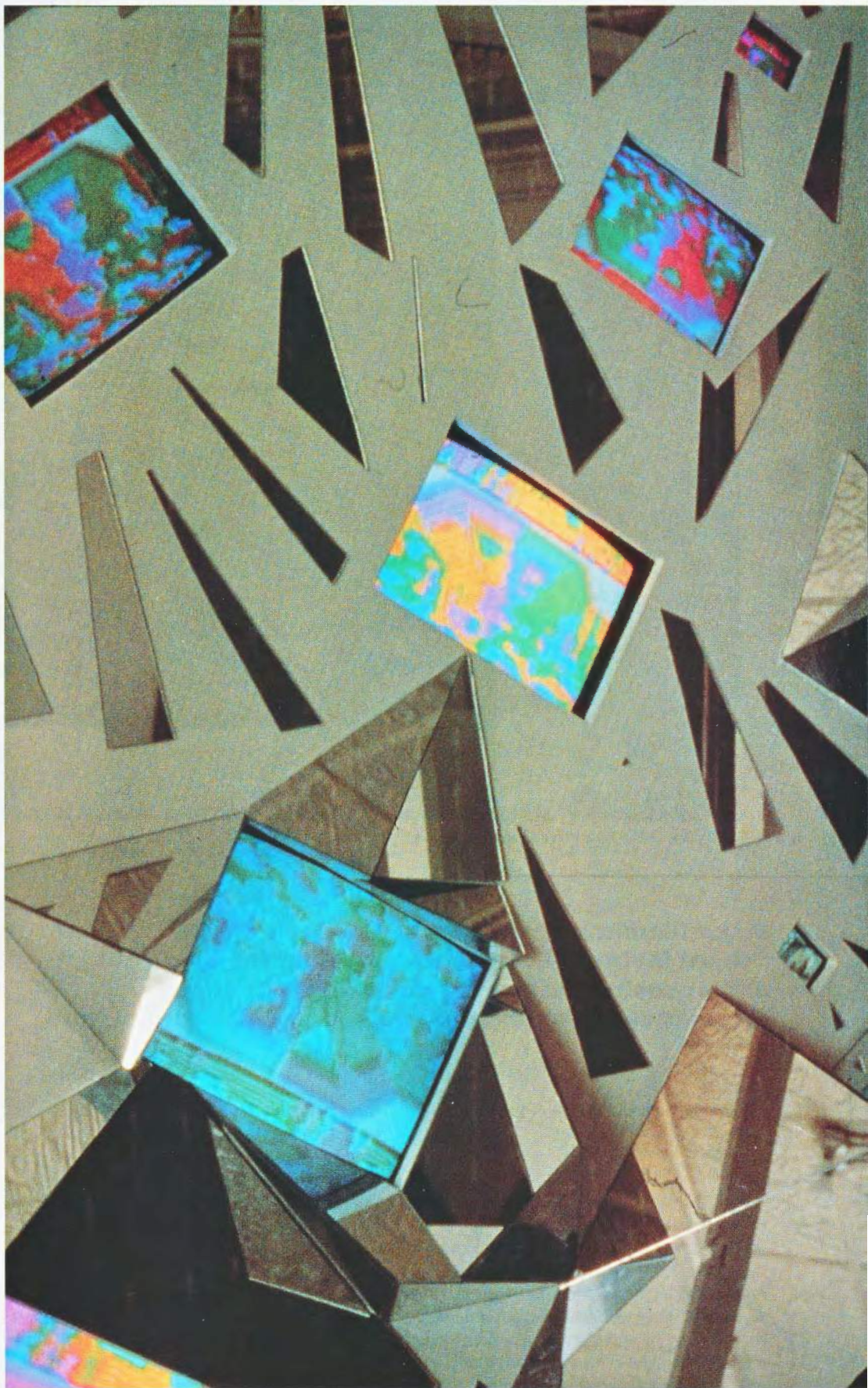
them Yamaguchi and Tono, Mako Idemitsu, Fujiko Nakaya, Nobuhiro Kawanaka, Haku-do Kobayashi and Keigo Yamamoto, jointly purchased a black-and-white portable video camera. They began exploring the technical limits of the medium and assisted with each others' projects, which ranged from formalistic works to social-documentaries. An example of formalist video is the work of Keigo Yamamoto, who attempted to use the medium to express the Japanese concepts of *ma* (the interval or space between people and objects) and *ki* (the energy that emanates from the spirit). He presented contrasts of real and depicted space and objects (in performance he placed his foot on top of a monitor showing the live image of his foot); he also created installations suggesting, by means of feedback and visual interference, the electric "aura" of video equipment. Around the same time Fujiko Nakaya's video *Friends of Minamata Victims* (1972), a record of a sit-in protesting a Japanese factory's negligent disposal of mercury and the ensuing poisoning of the residents of a town, became part of the protest it documented.

In the mid-'70s, members of Video Hiroba engaged in important cross-cultural exchanges. In '73, Hiroba videos were shown at a conference in Vancouver, B.C., and they received encouragement as well from New York documentarians John Reilly and Rudi Stern, who lectured at the Tokyo American Center. In '74 the "Tokyo-New York Video Express" presented the work of 30 American artists along with that of 15 Hiroba members at a hall in Tokyo.

The New York connection was established by Shigeko Kubota, a Japanese artist who had moved to the city in 1964 and had subsequently become involved in video because of her associations with Fluxus and with Nam June Paik. Kubota [see *A.i.A.*, Feb. '84], certainly the most famous Japanese video artist in the West today, created a *Video Self-Portrait* in 1970 and by 1975 was making sardonic video sculptures combining man-made and natural materials. Often her pieces comment on the position of women, and others pay homage to Marcel Duchamp, whose work is familiar to every art-school student in Japan.

Video Poem (1968-76) incorporates Kubota's anxious, Day-Glo-hued self-portrait videotape running on a monitor partially concealed inside a zippered nylon bag that is made to billow by a concealed electric fan. An accompanying text—a Dada poem with feminist overtones—is usually printed on a nearby wall. It reads:

Video is Vengeance of Vagina
Video is Victory of Vagina



Shigeko Kubota: *Niagara Falls I* (detail), 1985, video sculpture, 96 by 54 by 96 inches. Courtesy American Museum of the Moving Image.



Still from Mako Idemitsu's *Great Mother, Part II: "Yumiko," 1983-84.*

Mako Idemitsu spent nearly a decade on the "Great Mother" theme, investigating family discord and exposing the painful constraints of social conventions in a mixed Japanese-and-Western culture.

Video is Venereal Disease of Intellectuals
 Video is Vacant Apartment
 Video is Vacation of Art
 Viva Video . . .

In a retrospective exhibition of her work presented at the American Museum of the Moving Image in 1991 and recently shown at the Hara Museum in Tokyo, Kubota was recognized for her pioneering work in video as an artistic medium and for developing the category of video sculpture.¹ Her engaging pieces consist of various sculptural housings in which television equipment is disguised (or rendered visually neutral) while the video images themselves have consider-

able personal import. Whereas Japanese art as a whole tends to avoid expressions of emotion, for many years Kubota has recorded ardent feelings, especially in her video diaries dealing with traumatic events such as the death of her father. Another unsettling subject was the severe damage to her living space and work. This emotional approach has been adopted by some experimental video artists; articulation of personal expression makes such work the antithesis of video's commercial sister, broadcast television.

In addition to Video Hiroba, there were other groups in those early days, such as

Video Earth, founded by film animator Ko Nakajima toward the end of 1971 to unite people interested in public-access cable television.² But Nakajima is better known today for his later videotapes and installations. In recent works on the theme of wood, Nakajima combined actual trees and sheafs of grain with video images of fire. A particularly apocalyptic group of installations symbolized the earth with metal: he used videotape (which is plastic with metal oxide particles) to weave tents and clothing and to shroud rocks, mannequins and monitors. Nakajima's objective is to heighten viewers' awareness of ecological dilemmas, and there is conscious irony in the fact that he does so through high technology. He has pointed out that vast amounts of natural resources (such as water) are wasted in the manufacturing of electronic equipment. Some of his themes are derived from Taoism—for example, he bases series on the five elements, a metaphor for nature. He maintains that his