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Cover photo: from the videotape scenario for Sauve qui peut (la vie) [Every Man for Himself] (Jean-Luc Godard, 1980). Photo: Paul-Emmanuel Odin. Design: Carol Lafayette and Elisabeth Lyon.
camera obscura

A Journal of Feminism and Film Theory/24

Unspeakable Images

Special Issue Editors: Elisabeth Lyon and Raymond Bellour

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Recognized as two of Japan’s preeminent poets, Shuntaro Tanikawa
and Shuji Terayama have consistently explored new means of self-
expression. For more than thirty years, they have experimented with
the most traditional Japanese literary forms, working on the edges of
convention with an active group of interdisciplinary artists in Tokyo.
Both men responded to the radical energy and politics of Japan in the
late 1950s in very powerful and remarkably similar ways, despite their
different backgrounds: Tanikawa was born in Tokyo in 1931, the son
of a venerated philosopher; Terayama was born in 1935 in the cold,
dark northern province of Aomori and, without a father, had a close
bond with his mother. Long-time friends, their collaboration began in
the early 1960s when they wrote their first poetry together.

Tanikawa has worked with such traditional forms as “renga” (the
linked poem) and “haiku” since the 1950s, as well as with sonnets
and free verse. His writing has also been closely associated with visual
imagery. Early in his career he received commissions to create poetry
directly in response to photographs taken by artists, and over the years
he has written scripts for film, radio, and television, as well as texts
for illustrated children’s books. Tanikawa has a fascination for tech-
nical gadgets and in his teens began experimenting with cameras—
initially still photography then 8mm and 16mm film. In the late 1960s
he obtained his first video camera and recording deck—the early and
somewhat clumsy \frac{1}{2}\text{-inch} open-reel video system. He liked the im-
mediacy of being able to play back the just-recorded images and of
capturing sound and visuals simultaneously. He has continued to use
consumer video and also works with sound, producing records and
audiotapes, including readings of his poetry, which is uncommon in
Japan.

Terayama, although also a theater director and writer, is most fa-
mous in Japan for his distinguished “tanka” poetry, which he began
writing in his early twenties during a year-long stay in a hospital where
he was being treated for a chronic kidney ailment. Very conscious of
his own mortality, for the rest of his life Terayama worked compul-
sively. He put his poetry into action with Tenjo Sajiki, the guerilla theater that he started in the Shibuya section of Tokyo in the early 1960s. Always open to new ideas, he drew his inspiration for "tanka" from writing and talking with people in coffee shops and in the theater. He experimented with dance, rock music, and film and became something of a guru attracting a curious assortment of collaborators, including his mother. Terayama was popular with younger audiences and he published many essays, plays, and poems in paperback. Although the literary establishment did not always take his underground, "hippie" style of essay writing seriously, his book, *Sho o suteyo Machi e deyo* ("Throw away Your Books, Let’s Go into the Streets"), became something of a cult classic because it encouraged students to stop their study through rote memorization and to think on their own. Some schools prohibited students from reading the book, and considered Terayama to be desperate character and a bad influence.

In 1982, Katsue Tomiyama and Nobuhiro Kawanaka, co-founders of Image Forum (the experimental film/video center in Tokyo that publishes the film magazine of the same name), suggested that Tanikawa and Terayama jointly create a "video letter." The initial idea was to publish transcripts with stills of the work-in-progress in the monthly *Asahi Camera*. Chapters one through ten were published and are reprinted here.

With encouragement from both Image Forum and Asahi publishing, Tanikawa and Terayama began their video exchange. Tanikawa worked alone with his home video equipment; Terayama used a borrowed Sony system operated by an assistant. Their main principle was not to edit their individual letters, but to compose directly, intuitively, paying attention to the speed and flow of their unfolding ideas. As a kind of conversation in which spontaneity is central, *Video Letter* is close to "renga" poetry. Both are improvisations and are meant to represent an experience at the moment of articulation. What is expressed is connected to what precedes; either directly or more indirectly if, for example, the subject matter has changed. "Renga" is written in short but complete verses, one poet answering another’s just finished lines. While the form does have distinct rules and parameters, there is considerable room for imagination and innovation. Composed either by participants sitting in the same room together or apart through correspondence, "renga" was elevated to a high literary form during the 17th century by Matsuo Bashō and his followers. After a hundred-year hiatus, the form is somewhat in renaissance today. A "renga" series written by Tanikawa with other Japanese and European poets was recently published in West Germany.
What makes Video Letter such an extraordinary tape is that Terayama and Tanikawa combined a venerated literary form with the most rudimentary consumer video equipment and moved far beyond the limitations of traditional Japanese artistic vocabulary, the abstract and external subject matter of ka-cho-fu-getsu (flowers, birds, wind, and moon). The videotape has clarity as well as an underlying sadness and poignancy, partly due to Terayama’s illness and subsequent death. Concluded and assembled by Tanikawa, who edited out some sections and added audio dubbing, Video Letter became a kind of epitaph or mourning poem for Terayama. The work quietly closes with a slow pan of Terayama’s final electrocardiogram (stolen from the hospital by Tanikawa), as the pulsating line representing his heartbeat quiets and becomes straight. The videotape then ends with an image of a poem by Terayama posted on a pole by the sea:

20 years old. In May I was born
I tread on the leaves
and read young horse chestnuts
Now is the time
At the entry to my season
Bashfully towards birds
I raise my arm
20 years old. In May I was born.

We are grateful to Mr. H. Sato of Asahi Shimbun (Tokyo) for permission to reprint Video Letter (work-in-progress) from Asahi Camera and to Akiko Iimura for the English translation of the text which appears on pages 204–205 of this issue.
谷川俊太郎と寺山修司の

ビデオレター

谷川俊太郎さんと寺山修司さんについてビデオレターをお願いした二十数年後の友人。相手のことを互いに知りつよくしている関係だ。

だけど、考え合いながら、古い写真がありのままの自分、意味を無意味をもってスクリミングなイメージがテープに収められた、生きたない美しい関係を、生きたことあれば話す必要がある。