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SPIRITUALITY





TEIJI FURUHASHI

DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER

by Barbara London

Media provocateur Teiji Furuhashi's (1960-95) striking multi-disciplinary performances and installations distinguished a short, dynamic career. Cofounder of quick-witted collective Dumb Type, he evolved into a refined artist/composer and outspoken AIDS activist. He emerged in the mid-1980s alongside "diode" artist Tatsuo Miyajima and "mutant" sculptor Noboru Tsubaki, revealing a new face of Japan.

Teiji came from Kansai, embracing the cities of Osaka, Kobe, Nara and Kyoto, where locals are known for their humor and open minds. Kansai art students tend to be idiosyncratic, thriving on experimentation. Kyoto was Teiji's hometown. The imperial capital for one thousand years, Kyoto remains steeped in refined, unspoken rules. Teiji's

parents designed kimonos with exquisite fabrics. His babysitters were *maiko* trainees at his grandmother's geisha house. Accustomed to dressing up since childhood, he considered costumes transformative sculpture. Throughout his life the many guises he assumed did more to conceal than reveal his character.

A shy teenager, Teiji played drums in jazz and rock bands, later turning to keyboard and guitar. At Kyoto University of Arts, teachers Seinosuke Sekine and Yasumasa Morimura introduced him to performance and conceptual art. He absorbed the information and made something distinct: *7 Conversation Styles* (1984), a black-and-white video punctuated by his own electronic music. In this first video,

Above ■ Teiji Furuhashi performing at "Diamond Hour" in 1994. Courtesy Dumb Type, Kyoto. Right ■ **LOVERS** (1994), Installation: five video projectors, two slide projectors, two sound systems with synchronizing hardware and software, metal shelving. Overall dimensions 32'10" x 32'10". Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Canon ARTLAB.

fear



love is everywhere







he stumbles in jerky motions, a “dumb” robotized everyman silhouetted against a “mountain” in the monkey house of Kyoto’s zoo. The work appeared in “New Video Japan” at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1986.

Feeling hampered by video, Teiji resolutely sought to expand the medium. He frequented the student-run “Drugstore,” a club modeled on the “milk bar” of Stanley Kubrick’s film *Clockwork Orange*, where he and other students programmed experimental film and video series.

Teiji paid his way to Manhattan in 1985. He hung out downtown, sewing costumes for Meredith Monk’s “Book of Days” and going to experimental theater. He and a friend performed at the East Village Pyramid Club as the “Kookie Kabuki Sisters.” They vamped doing ikebana, sushi and tea ceremony. He befriended performance artists on the scene including John Kelly, John Epperson (aka Lypsinka) and Ethyl Eichelberger, who took him under their wing.

RETURNING HOME, HE MET SIMONE FUKAYUKI, THE QUEEN OF DRAG QUEENS, AND THEY LAUNCHED MONTHLY “DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER” PARTIES AT OSAKA AND TOKYO NIGHTCLUBS. THIS WAS THE “BUBBLE PERIOD,” WHEN MONEY FLOWED. Lip-synching, Teiji performed as Julie Andrews, or as his alter-ego “Glorious Wanson.”

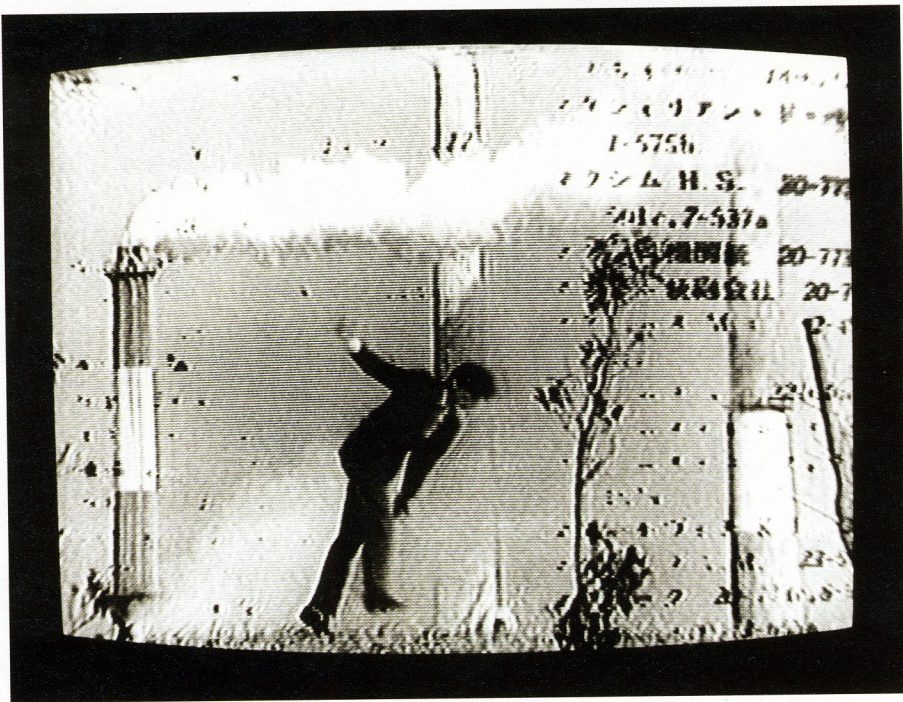
In school, Teiji teamed with fellow students Toru Koyamada, Yukihiro Hozumi, Shiro Takatani, Takayuki Fujimoto and Hiromasa Tomari, all eager to move art

beyond museum and gallery walls. Attracted to technology but suspicious of the information-age dream, they founded Dumb Type, a collective of architects, designers, choreographers, actors, artists and computer programmers.

“We were frustrated artists, and wanted to start creating something new with our skills,” Teiji said. Dissatisfied with the master/apprentice relationship of traditional theater companies, Dumb Type’s members had equal decision-making voices. They established an office in an old building at the end of Kyoto’s main strip, Kawaramachidori. The tiny space buzzed at night after everyone’s day jobs. They brainstormed for projects using visuals as the main form of communication.

Pleasure Life (1987–88), Dumb Type’s first significant performance and installation, evolved around the group’s vision of high-tech, megatropolis existence. The English title conjures both detached daily routines—karaoke bars, fast-food restaurants and celebrity talk shows—and the refined culture of the past.

The set resembled a gargantuan integrated circuit, featuring a bristling grid with 36 pedestals supporting ordinary household objects: electric fans, glasses of water and TV sets depicting images of sky and grassy fields. Within the pedestals, white fluorescent kitchen light-rings flashed on-and-off. Performers moved silently among the pedestals accompanied by mellifluous yet commanding voices and TV-jingle music. In android fashion, they mimed brushing



their teeth, heading to work, picnicking and channel-surfing.

Dumb Type's next project began with an image of performers trapped inside a giant photocopier. **ENJOYING HIGHER PRODUCTION VALUES, *pH* (1990) EXPRESSED A LATE 1980S VIEW OF LIFE, "A COLD DESPAIR CAMOUFLAGED BY SEDUCTIVE IMAGERY."** *pH* premiered at Spiral, the fashionable theater-restaurant-shop complex designed by Fumihiko Maki, which had recently opened in Tokyo's trendy Aoyama area. Spiral's owner, Kyoto-based lingerie company Wacoal, sponsored the work.

pH's title implies a measurement (litmus test) for modern life. Collaborating with writer/translator Alfred Birnbaum, Dumb Type constructed an ambiguous text based on Japanese and English. The flow of spoken words bestowed enough coherence to hook local and foreign audiences.

pH viewers sat on high, narrow bleachers along a "game court." Two computer-automated metal bars swept across the space, controlling the activities of five performers. Slide-projectors mounted on the upper bar acted as searchlights (the bright light within a photocopier) maintaining surveillance over performers' movements, and projecting images onto the floor of such generic yet charged symbols as international currency signs. The lower bar aggressively coursed the space 16 inches above the floor, forcing performers to lie down or jump over it. A sound track of sampled and original music drove this intense, precision performance. The con-

stant was the clock-pulse of time, metered out by a tennis-ball pitching machine hurling balls onto the stage with merciless regularity.

The performers' stiff actions conveyed obedience to strictly codified social behavior. Teiji played a major role. Trim and gamin-like, he emerged in a brown Western suit that evoked Kyoto in the late 19th century when, still favoring luxurious textiles, men preferred the British look. The *pH* suit suggests Dumb Type had their eyes on the West. The Japan Foundation supported their aspirations by shipping *pH*'s equipment to Europe, where the group found appreciative audiences.

A pivotal scene involves Teiji slowly stripping off the suit, which the other male performer puts on. A metamorphosis, the action connects to rebirth and nature's cycles. Teiji knew he was HIV positive and was becoming open about it.

S/N premiered in 1994. A gifted composer, Teiji spent days intuitively selecting single electronic tones for the score. Large projections, featuring details of performers' bodies and doctors' waiting rooms, served as sets. The most personal work of his career, *S/N* opens with Teiji wearing placards reading "male," "Japanese," "HIV" and "homosexual." Other performers wore similar signs. The group then turned and addressed the audience saying, "We're sorry to tell you that we're not actors. We are what we're labeled." From a conference table, writer/theorist Akira Asada imparted gravitas and authenticity, reporting

Left ■ **7 CONVERSATION STYLES** (1984), Video. Courtesy of Dumb Type, Kyoto.

Right ■ **DUMB TYPE—S/N** (1994), Performance. Photo by Shiro Takatani. Courtesy of Dumb Type, Kyoto.



hard facts about AIDS in Japan.

Teiji wanted to break down the boundary between art and life and “counter the stereotypes in AIDS art... to give *S/N* an edge without forfeiting a sense of humor and without creating a huge distance from the audience.” The title—S for signal and N for noise—comes from audio terminology, referring to the relative amount of effective versus extraneous information contained in a coded message, the S/N ratio. Teiji saw it as “a straightforward metaphor for the complexity of the times we live in. It’s an extreme interpretation of sex, but somehow it expresses my feelings after losing many close friends to AIDS and experiencing the futile struggle with science and bureaucracy. It is like screaming into a black hole.”

If *S/N* burned like the sun, Teiji’s solo-installation *Lovers* (1994) glowed with the moonlight. **“S/N IS MORE DIRECT, MORE SWEATY AND BITCHY SOMEHOW... LOVERS IS VERY SOOTHING AND HOPELESSLY ROMANTIC.”** This last installation is Spartan. A metal tower with five synchronized projectors on rotating shelves occupies the center of an otherwise empty gallery. Technology operates as dutiful stagehand.

Produced by Canon ARTLAB, *Lovers* (1994) allows visitors to interact with life-size dancers projected onto the gallery’s black walls. The naked figures appear spectral, drained of life. After a while, their actions become familiar,

so it is a surprise when two of the translucent bodies come together in a virtual embrace.

Lovers has a two-part soundscape. When the running figures pause, the air fills with whispered, indistinguishable phrases, as if a murmuring audience has clustered somewhere, voices hushed in awe. A series of metallic “tings” in the aural foreground resembles the bleeps of hospital diagnostic machines.

When the installation is not crowded, one of the videotape figures—Teiji—stops and seeks out a lone viewer, facing this person with arms outstretched. The gesture is not a beckoning one; rather, the artist assumes a beatific pose, vulnerable and exposed. Then, as if on a precipice, he falls backward into the unknown, accepting his fate. In reaching directly out to a single viewer, Teiji belies notions that technology necessarily overwhelms the human spirit.

At 35, Teiji Furuhashi had reached his prime, knowing he would never go farther than his last work. As the summation of his career, *Lovers* is something magical and universal, delicate technology. It is a transcendent epithet for an extraordinary artist. **END**

Curator BARBARA LONDON met Teiji Furuhashi in 1984 while researching the exhibition “New Video Japan.” Over the years she visited Dumb Type regularly, and attended their performances from workshop to completed production. Her many conversations with Teiji Furuhashi deepened her understanding of Japan and its culture. She thanks Alfred Birnbaum, Fujiko Nakaya, Ryoji Ikeda, Meredith Monk, and Shu Lea Cheang for sharing their recollections of Teiji Furuhashi.