

# Words to Avatars: Expressing Place in Cyberspace

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If we relate hardware, circuitry and wiring to the computer — a physical machine — then the Internet is superfluous, existing on the fringes of computer systems. The Internet itself is made up of electrical impulses, transmissions, and conceptual data. How does one convey the importance of one's physical place in fictitious cyberspace?

In 1996, Victoria Vesna addressed the emotional concerns of travel in cyberspace without a physical body, in her website entitled *Bodies, Inc.* Edouardo Kac utilized the Internet for soliciting a collective global effort from multiple physical locations to funnel nurturing light to a single plant in a darkened room — another physical location. That same year, Masaki Fujihata, in *Global Interior Project*, used a physical “Matrix-Cube” kinetic sculpture to map out the virtual space of his interactive program. Fujihata's more recent work utilizes Global Positioning Systems to document the character of a given place for storage and retrieval. Examining the character of a place, and analyzing the concept of experiential space via the virtual interconnected universe of the Internet, gives one an awareness of one's own unique geographic place.

Although characteristics of place vary from culture to culture, and are of global concern, the culture and characteristics of Japan have a uniqueness that brings about awareness in individual artists that become internationally active. I would like to ask whether or not there is a concern for retaining cultural characteristics in their work, and transferring cultural traditions of place through cyberspace?

## Old media to new media — transferring place

*Beyond Pages*, an interactive work by Masaki Fujihata that developed out of a thematic exhibition concerning the future of the book, tried to predict how digital technology would change the nature of how we interact with text and images in the future. Rather than turning pages, we click on images; rather than moving through a

narrative in a linear fashion, we interact through tree-like branches, receiving responses to our individual choices. Images and text come alive before our eyes.

The word “media” used to mean “books” or the printed word in newspapers or magazines, which were disseminated to the public to inform people of recent events. Japan now has assimilated the term “New Media” for digital and electronic art, a by-product of the “information society.” In 1998, the NTT InterCommunication Center held an exhibition entitled *The Library of Babel*. The concept behind this thematic exhibition was based upon the idea of the library, or place where media is housed, as a metaphor for the universe. In Masaya Takeda's article “The Marvelous Story of A Book from the Sky” in the exhibition catalog, the book from the sky was the illegible piece of literature dropped from heaven in an indecipherable attempt from the gods to communicate to humankind.<sup>1</sup> Explained by Takeda, Chinese (kanji) characters have three essential elements: a physical form, a phonetic, and a meaning. Those characters that have lost the phonetic and meaning, but have survived in physical form, are useless to us today, similar to the fabricated nonsense characters found in Xu Bing's infamous work entitled *A Book from the Sky* of 1991 installed in the ICC exhibition. Masao Komura, one of the digital pioneers of the 1960s CTG group in Japan, was also an artist/participant in the show with his *Non-Word Dictionary*. Komura used the computer to place random characters together into nonsensical words. Pages and pages of words were organized into bound volumes and set like an encyclopedia on a shelf. The title of the whole exhibition used the biblical concept of Babel, in which the Lord intercedes in humankind's deliberate attempt to build a tower to the heavens by mixing their languages so that the people involved in the task could no longer understand one another. Without the ability to communicate, people could not work together, and therefore, the task could not be completed. The biblical story of Babel is related to the philosophical undercurrent that word is a concept equated with divine forces. “Word” existed before the written text, and in the biblical use of the term, there is more to “Word”

than a practical tool for communication. In the New Testament, the evangelist John wrote “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”<sup>22</sup> John equates the “Word” with God. The Word is a concept before it takes form as written text. In the original Chinese language interpretation of the New Testament John 1:1 was translated as, “In the beginning was the Dao.” What better way to translate the conceptual meaning of the “Word” in the Bible?<sup>3</sup>

Although Donna Cox has used the Daoist concept of oneness “ [...] as a metaphor for the interrelatedness of electronic-mediated societies,”<sup>24</sup> here I use the Dao as a metaphor for the complex layering and enfolding of pathways in computer database systems and algorithmic processes. The conceptual nature of electronic media, and its potential for the artist, is complex indeed, and is changing the way we perceive and create. It is also changing our perception of the concept of “Word”. Just as words, and sometimes images, could be used to convey the concept of place in the old media of printed books (when legible of course), a combination of words, images, sounds and motion can now be used to convey the character of place via New Media.

## **Changing perceptions of place**

The ICC InterCommunication Center in Tokyo held its *Art Meets Media* retrospective show of Media Art in 2005 in which Alexej Shulgin compared Software Art to Concept Art. Explaining that Software, or computer programming is the “flesh” of digital media, even as the intangible substance of the World Wide Web is “ [...] probably, the most undefined, ungraspable and ephemeral art form ever existed.”<sup>25</sup> This new way of exploring art concepts, through software and globally through the Internet, has impressed a younger generation of artists in a way that has promised a whole new direction for the art world — no longer centered in New York City or Paris. Place is neither here nor there, it can be past or future.

Mariko Mori is an example of one artist from Japan enlightened to her culture’s uniqueness through her own foreign experiences. She grew up in Japan, became a model at the age of sixteen, studied fashion design at a standard women’s two-year college; left Japan to study art in London (Byam Shaw School of Art and Chelsea College of Art), then studied at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. Her experience in the multicultural environment of New York heightened her awareness of the uniqueness of Japan’s spiritual culture, and this had a great impact on the content of her work.<sup>6</sup> Parallels can be seen between Mori’s digitally manipulated photographs of herself in costume and context and those of Yasumasa Morimura. The big difference between the artwork of the two artists is that Mori parodies the place of the future while Morimura’s work is a play on the past. Morimura dons costume to pose as the main characters in historically significant works of art like Manet’s *Olympia*, and to mimic past celebrities like Madonna and Michael Jackson. Mariko Mori, however, becomes a futuristic Cyborg tea server (in Tokyo), or a yet unknown pop star.

Mori expresses her own awareness of the value that diversity brings to a place. Typically, however, fans of Japanese art and culture look for superficial influences in contemporary art like stereotypical motifs of Japanese icons, i.e. Mt. Fuji and Geisha, but the more interesting and profound cultural influences are perhaps found in an individual’s way of thinking or responding to the physical and spiritual environment.

## **Documenting the character of place**

Masaki Fujihata has recently worked with Geographically Based Profiles using GPS Technology to gather together fragments of character from an existing social body spread over a specific region via randomly conducted interviews, then stitched together in a framework according to their intersections in time and space. For the first project in this series, the visual data was collected

during a hiking trip by approximately 120 people along the coast of the island of Mersea near Essex, England. Using their digital cameras, individuals in each group would record conversations and activities. The location of each digital recording was noted using a GPS locating system. Afterward, the digital images and video clips were gathered along a timeline. Each visual recording is marked by a still image along the line. As the viewer follows the line through the CAVE application, and comes to a screen, the viewer may activate the screen to view the clip. Some of Fujihata's Geographically Based Profiles are conducted in Japan. The purpose of these visual databases, however, is to record the nonlinear character of a unique place, no matter where the place is physically located. I suppose this particular project can be placed in the hands of anyone, at any physical location, to record and convey the character of that place

and its unique inhabitants regardless of their cultural origins or ideological persuasions. The character of a place is made up of a community of individuals. Fujihata's Geographically Based Profiles are like video polls, a random sampling of the ideas, perceptions and preferences of the people in a given area. Such is the complexity, or simplicity of location. Fujihata makes a concerted effort to preserve the character of a unique place, and that is what his current art is about.

Some artists consciously incorporate a sense of place in their work, and others subconsciously search for a physical outlet for their conceptual work. From the user's perspective, it often remains a mystery. The variations on the exploration of place in cyberspace are seemingly endless.

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- 1 Takeda, Masaya. 1998. "The Marvelous Story of the Book from the Sky." In *The Library of Babel*. Exh. Cat. NTT InterCommunication Center. Tokyo: NTT Publishing Co., Ltd., pp. 104[042].
  - 2 *The Holy Bible*, New International Version (The International Bible Society, 1973, 1978, 1984).
  - 3 太初有道，道与神同在，道就是神。这道太初与神同在。Chinese Union Version Bible (Bible Gateway, Onlines Bibles) Public Domain. <http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/index.php?action=getVersionInfo&vid=80#copy>
  - 4 Cox, Donna. 1989. "The Tao of Postmodernism: Computer Art, Scientific Visualization and Other Paradoxes." In *Leonardo, Computer Art in Context, Supplemental Issue*, p. 7.
  - 5 Shulgin, Alexej. 2005. "Software Art." In *Art Meets Media: Adventures in Perception*. Exh. Cat. NTT InterCommunication Center. Tokyo: NTT Publishing Co., Ltd., p. 139.
  - 6 Mori, Moriko quoted in Kunie Sugiura, "Interview with Mariko Mori." In *Journal of Contemporary Art Online*. Date not listed (post 1995). <http://www.jca-online.com/mori.html>.