

## Report on my research stay in Japan

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I had the invaluable privilege of participating in the National Center for Art Research's program for field research in Japan while working on the curatorial team for the 14th Shanghai Biennale, titled *Cosmos Cinema*.

*Cosmos Cinema*, which opened on November 8, 2023, and finished on March 31, 2024, at the Power Station of Art in Shanghai, China, attempts to parse out the myriad modes through which artists have made sense of our ever-evolving relationship to the cosmos. The exhibition starts from the principle that our material and psychological relationship to the cosmos conditions all life on earth, and that by reflecting and reimagining those relationships, we might change the way we live together.

There has been a proliferation in recent years of exhibitions that ask visitors to reconsider their implication in the complex systems that shape life on earth. The 14th Shanghai Biennale is the first major international exhibition to insist that we are entangled in cosmic as well as terrestrial systems, and that this shift in perspective might help us to address the crises engulfing life on earth. In short, we are not "outside" the cosmos. This is not an exhibition strictly about space travel or science fiction. Rather, as a curatorial team we were interested in exhibiting how artists make sense of the fact that we are always and indivisibly part of the cosmos.

My research in Japan made a sizable impact in my understanding of the themes of the Biennale. When I visited Japan in July of 2023, I was able to go on studio visits to engage directly with Japanese artists who are making work related to the exhibition's themes, and I was able to attend a plethora of museum shows throughout Japan, where I encountered even more opportunities to think through our curatorial vision. Thanks to colleagues at the National Center for Art Research, I was also able to meet fascinating figures within Tokyo's contemporary art scene.

My first studio visit of the trip was in Shiga, a short train ride from Osaka to visit the studio of Yuriko Sasaoka. Our curatorial team had been very keen on meeting Yuriko, who works across installation, painting, embroidery, video art, and performance. Her work investigates the possibilities—and limits—of representation in entertainment media including theater, song, and the shared screen. Through immersive video installations that often invoke the figure of the marionette—a symbol of political puppeteering and gendered normativity—she works in the space between the lucid and the surreal.

We were very fortunate to include three embroidery paintings from the Gyro series in the Shanghai Biennale. These paintings show demons as characters that run on treadmills and bounce on balance balls. These fanciful-seeming works are in fact a direct response to—and a means of processing—the trauma of the 2011 tsunami and earthquake in Japan. Gyro as a whole aspires to tap into the collective consciousness of those who live in zones at risk of disaster or, as Sasaoka puts it, “between life and death.” Within the Biennale, Yuriko’s works are situated within the chapter of the exhibition that we call “Partial Eclipse.” This chapter is addressed to the cosmic phenomena that are hidden from sight, obscure to reason, and might even be unknowable. Like the dark energy believed to account for a large part of the universe, these forces operate at every scale and are as resistant to detection as they are to representation. Humans have constructed many strategies—including art—through which to access these occluded forms of matter and energy. Yuriko’s works share space with other works that move beyond the limits of scientific objectivity and abstract logic, accommodating embodied forms of knowledge including ecstatic revelation and mystical experience.

Back in Tokyo, I had the opportunity to meet filmmaker Takashi Makino at BankART in Yokohama, where he was preparing for a solo exhibition of his films. Takashi works professionally as a colorist on feature films and music videos, but, since 2004, he has been shooting his own films as well. He shoots natural phenomena, people, streets, and found objects, editing them into highly organic and imaginative films. Takashi showed me clips from many recent film projects, including films that he produced during the pandemic lockdown. As a curatorial team, we were very keen on including Takashi’s work in two capacities: as a film installation, and as performance. Beyond his film works, Takashi is a talented performer: he mixes sound live against the stunning visuals of his films. The result is an experience that transports people into an entirely new atmospheric cosmos. In Shanghai, Takashi performed *Memento Stella*, a project he developed from 2016-2018. The visuals used in this performance consist of more than 200 layers of 4K video images that, when perceived by the audience, remind us that we reside among the stars. For Takashi, the meaning of this performance stems from the fact that “it is not only death that binds us” and that, if we remember that we are all living collectively on this small planet among the stars, then we might be able to connect across the differences that seem to divide us.

Within the exhibition, we curated the 16-minute single-channel video *Anti-cosmos*, which superimposes and synthesizes thousands of images of found concrete objects into a disorienting whirl. The film is displayed within a blackbox screening room among the constellation of works that comprise the section of the show we called “Solar Assembly Line.” This chapter includes works that take into consideration the fact that life’s reliance on the sun

is perhaps the most vivid demonstration of our entanglement in cosmic phenomena. The sun might historically have been a symbol of vertical authority, but it is also the instigator of change. Cycles of solar activity have been correlated to periods of economic boom and bust, revolution, epidemic, and population migration on earth. Works in this chapter imagine the sun, the moon, and the planets not as eternal guarantors of world order but as sites of resistance and sources of emancipatory dynamism, capable of inspiring—and powering—dreams of freedom. Victory over the sun might constitute humanity’s ultimate triumph over death, or it could plunge us into deeper chaos.

I then travelled to Minato Ward to visit Yokota Tokyo, the gallery that represents the influential Kobe-born, Chiba-based artist Tatsuo Kawaguchi. The gallerists showed me works from Mr. Kawaguchi’s COSMOS series. It was amazing to behold these in person, after only having seen them through digital images online. In his COSMOS series, Mr. Kawaguchi continues his life-long investigation into the theme of “relation.” His work visualizes and represents the relations that exist within almost every phenomenon: light and dark, individual and society, deep historical time and the present moment. In the works I saw at the gallery, Mr. Kawaguchi indicates the time it has taken for the light from each star to reach us by writing in watercolor on astronomical photographs of constellations. That we are looking into the distant past when we look to the skies inherently compels us to contemplate the nature of time, space, and our position in the universe. The works perform the act of stargazing while commenting on its metageography. By reproducing this act of looking in itself, Mr. Kawaguchi’s works underscore the intrinsic connection between our inner elemental cosmos and the outer stellar cosmos: each time we look at the stars, we are reminded that we are composed of the same atomic principles. Thus, our act of stargazing becomes a circuitous relationship: we are renewed elementally by receiving light from the stars.

Mr. Kawaguchi’s works were displayed within the show’s chapter titled “Of Time and Space.” Space is socially produced, experienced, and understood. Our maps express ideological, philosophical, and psychological prejudices. The view from above of surveying maps assumes a godlike and timeless perspective. But concepts of above and below are meaningless in mapping the cosmos, where time is inseparable from space. The works displayed alongside Mr. Kawaguchi’s consider how and whether it is possible to represent the many dimensions in which the cosmos extends. The maps collected in this section describe a cosmos as infinitely various as the points from which it is perceived and posit the existence of a whole that is comprised of the interactions between them and, consequently, can never be perceived from any single point. Mr. Kawaguchi’s works exemplify this phenomenon: while prompting us to challenge the primacy of perspective, his works remind us that space and time are inherently

slippery and strange, flexible and fragile.

NCAR was so generous in assisting with the planning of other meetings for me. It was amazing to be so enmeshed in such a lively group of people, including many young players in the Tokyo arts scene, and I'm already working on more curatorial projects with some of the artists and curators I met in Tokyo. The entire curatorial team and I are endlessly grateful for NCAR's dedication to the success of the Shanghai Biennale, and part of the exhibition's strength no doubt comes from what I learned while on my research trip in Japan.