

Video in the L.A. Festival

By Holly Willis

The emphasis on art from the Pacific Rim is an opportunity to question our relationship to foreign work. The questions asked by all viewers of art, namely where do we position ourselves and by what standards do we judge this work, are especially important when the element of otherness carries the project of ethnography or anthropology along with it. Furthermore, inequities implicit in the economic hierarchies of first, second, and third world nations necessarily surface in regard to this judgement, requiring an awareness that the political conditions of an artist's work may necessitate a very different artistic agenda. The variety of video programs in the Los Angeles Festival are a testament to both the difficulties of these questions, as well as the excitement of that difference.

Video is an excellent tool for documentary work since it is inexpensive, accessible, and easy to use. The ability to manipulate, construct, and deconstruct images in editing also makes video the favored medium for many artists. Both the documentary and artistic aspects of video are represented in the festival, demonstrating a wide diversity of political contexts and agendas.

Traversals: Instructions to the Double, at the Long Beach Museum of Art, is a collection of nine videotapes selected by Australian video artist Peter Callas. Each tape illustrates an artist's crossing of cultural boundaries and his or her artistic response to the other side. Callas writes in the curator's introduction in the show catalog that artists frequently make "the other" a stand-in for themselves, a double or doppelganger. As enigmatic and unknowable, the other can also be seen as one's own unconscious, the mysterious and unbound. This show's premise, then, brings into question the ethics of the relationship of the self to the other in a particularly interesting formulation.

Callas's own tape, *Neo Geo: An American Purchase* (1989), uses icon computer imagery layered in a complex, moving pattern to demonstrate the currency of cultural symbols. The second half of the tape uses music from John Zorn's album, *The Big Gundown: John Zorn Plays the Music of Ennio Morricone*, a musical parallel that reinforces Callas' appropriation and subversion. I saw the tape on a monitor, but for the show Callas plans to



Video still from "Neo Geo: An American Purchase" by Peter Callas.

incorporate the tape into an installation, *The Fujiyama Pyramid Project*, which will consist of eleven monitors built into a huge pyramid, with green and red lights, paint, and a fan blowing pieces of material to resemble a fire. The plans are quite intricate and the installation is sure to be dazzling.

The *Land of the Elevator Girls* (1989) by Steina is a humorous account of the opening and closing of a multitude of elevator doors in Japan where the elevators are generally accompanied by women employed to greet passengers. The elevators in this tape open on surreal landscapes, and the conjunction of propriety and the ridiculous is very funny.

Another humorous tape is Bruce and

the passage through space in actual time, without cuts, in a shot of two men sitting on the subway and the reflection of lights and other trains in the window behind their heads. The two passengers remain absolutely still through the ride, as if meditating; the shot is elegant, and ironic in that it is an interval that would normally be edited out.

The show is an excellent conceptual investigation of the relationship of the artist to the "other" and the manner in which this relationship is expressed. Another very interesting group of tapes is being exhibited at LACE in a show titled *...Will be Televised: Video Documents from Asia* coordinated by Shu Lea Cheang. The premise of this

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Norman Yonemoto's *Kappa*, which combines an informative discussion of the mythical Japanese creature with a fictional tale that suggests a link between Oedipal desire, repression, and the Kappa in western culture. The Kappa is a Shinto god of fresh water who is characterized by a dish-like indentation in his skull to carry water in, a need for blood, and a lust for young women. In the fictional part of the tape, Mike Kelley scampers around the landscape with a green face and a dish on his head, rummaging through a pile of women's underwear and watching erotic tapes.

Edin Velez's tape, *Meaning of the Interval* (1987), illustrates the notion of space between intervals, an important concept in Japan. The best example of the term in the tape is a subway ride between two points. Velez shows

exhibition is that the United States receives through network news a very limited and politically determined view of social and political events in Asia. These tapes were made by individuals in Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, and were selected on the basis of their coverage of the events preceding major political and social struggles and continuing after world interest has moved on to other major events. These tapes will be shown at LACE, September 1 through September 23.

Other video programs in the Los Angeles Festival include *Native Images: Film and Video from the First Peoples* at the American Film Institute, September 1, and *Siempre Presente: Latina Perspectives in Video* at the AFI on Sep