INTERNALIZING DIGITAL PHENOMENA: THE ‘PERFORMING’ BODY AT THE INTERSECTION OF JAPANESE CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY

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Contemporary Japan is often described in terms of its high-tech industries and advanced technologies: that is, a Gibsonian image of ‘exotic’ Japanese technoculture. However, up until the late-1990s, Japan lagged behind in many areas of digital services and commodities such as the use of Automatic Teller Machines (ATMs) or the Internet, which had become the norm in other developed countries. One may think that the surface image and the local reality do not match, but the Japanese themselves are oblivious to gaps observed by non-Japanese. What this suggests is that there is no single logic or pathway for the ‘digital transformation’ of any given modern society. Importantly, as this essay will stress, such transformative processes are not uniform, and are subject to culturally specific negotiations – and contestations – that can best be understood as performative. In this sense, it is possible to say that the Japanese are ‘performing Japan’. I would, however, like to stress that such performance is a contingent cultural operation, which affects cultural renewals by transforming or appropriating tradition and current practice. This does not mean that older Japanese traditions – as discussed, for example, by Benedict (1946) – have disappeared completely, but that traditional or accepted cultural traits may manifest themselves in different or new modes and contexts. Through this transformative interaction of contemporary Japanese culture and digital technology, manifestations of these traits can be located in particular
everyday responses and attitudes towards such technology. This essay, therefore, seeks in part to examine Japanese reactions to technological change that may appear peculiar to non-Japanese observers.

As emblematic of digital technology that constitutes what I will call a ‘digital living condition’, this chapter focuses on the popular phenomenon of keitai (the Japanese term for mobile phone), highlighting users’ inextricable relationship to the technology.2 When cultural commentators discuss the social phenomena of the digital transformation and its impact on the Japanese people, the behaviour of Japanese consumers is often cited, and, for many critics, the particular use of keitai exemplifies their passivity. This essay sees the presumed submissiveness of the Japanese consumer differently. My focus is on what the consumers make or do – a functional approach derived from de Certeau (1984) – and how their everyday life reinvents itself. Daily performance is the key concept for understanding how domestic electronic technology, exemplified by keitai, is absorbed into everyday life in the urban Japanese environment. This daily performance, which is, as I will explain, a bodily performance, neutralizes the otherness of technology through iterative use. In fact, the frequent use of portable communication technology has made the device ‘transparent’ for many Japanese people, especially for the young, in their everyday urban pursuits.

To add a different perspective to current sociological and ethnological analyses of the particularity of keitai use, I will discuss contemporary Japanese performance/media art works that deal with issues relating to an increasingly media-saturated urban environment. In particular, I will examine different artistic strategies that explicitly treat the condition of digital living. Concerns expressed by Japanese contemporary media artists seem to suggest that many of them are interested in finding a new way to deal with the digital environment in which they live. Interestingly, the younger generation of artists appears to ‘internalize’ the digital environment through a process of accommodation. This essay wishes to read the performance work of Dumb Type, a renowned Japanese artists’ collective, as a response to the Japanese digital environment, and as a vehicle for investigating an intermediated mode of expression generated between the performing body and technology (Plates 30, 31). Through performed interaction, the bodies of Dumb Type’s performers, which appear to be thrown into audio-visual streams, somehow create a space for existence in the digital environment. The audience can observe both the performers’ congruence with technological streams, and their bodies’ resistance to them and transformation by them. I argue here that this ambivalent relationship between the performing body and the digital environment in an art context parallels the contemporary Japanese urban