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WEBEXCLUSIVE

Minoru Yoshida : Performance in New York

by George Kan

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Minoru Yoshida, *Synthesizer Jacket #2*, 1974. Courtesy Midori Yoshida and Ulterior Gallery. Photographer unknown.

It isn't often that new works emerge from the depths of artists' archives, but when they do, viewers are offered new perspectives on an artist's work. This is the case with never-before exhibited video documentations of Minoru Yoshida's New York performances, at Ulterior Gallery. Yoshida rose to fame in Japan in the late 1960s as part of the Gutai Art Association. His sculptures, made from colored plexiglass, often underlit in bright luminous colors and containing electronic moving parts, rewarded him with critical acclaim. Apart from a few paintings that represent his earlier style from

the sixties, those shown at Ulterior Gallery present a noticeable shift in Yoshida's practice, which came with his relocation to New York City in 1970. Presumably influenced by the New York art scene, Yoshida moved from painting and sculpture towards performance, sound, and wearable art.

Yoshida created Synthesizer Jacket in 1974, an armour-like vest with embedded switchboards and control panels, made from brightly colored plastic combined with electronic components—similar to materials he had used in his sculpture. Yoshida also wired speakers into panels strapped to the wearer's thighs. By flicking switches on the jacket, the wearer could generate a whirring soundscape of electronic beeps, fizzes, and repeating notes. Although the original jacket itself has now been lost, this wearable electronic art acts as the unifying protagonist across the three videos on display at this exhibition, with each video documenting a different performance from 1976. In one video, also titled Synthesizer Jacket, Yoshida is seen wearing his electronic creation, which appears to be attached to a freestanding plexiglass sculptural speaker. He wanders around, slowly turning switches on the jacket to adjust the plethora of space-age futuristic sounds. The jacket sits over his bare torso, and the sci-fi look is completed with leggings, knee-high boots, and foil ovals over his eyes, recalling movies of Lycra-clad, bionic, intergalactic men and women. While our contemporary eyes may see these futuristic motifs as comedic, whimsical, or insubstantial, it may be our own loss to be so quick to dismiss their poetic potential. For Yoshida, the turn to the interstellar carries a more sincere undertone.

In a 1969 interview in *Mainichi Graphic*, a Japanese magazine, Yoshida surprised the journalist by introducing himself as an alien. While there may certainly be some irony in his self-branding, a manifesto-like document displayed at Ulterior Gallery shows an earnest investment in alien forms. The document, *Epicurism of Space Universe: The Absolute Landscape #3 (1976)*, describes the possibility of a “psychic revolution” by means of “extraterrestrials.” He outlines over various bullet-points how these extraterrestrials have traversed time and space to arrive at a balance “between the internal landscape (Mind) and the external landscape (Cosmos).” For Yoshida, it appears, the figure of the extraterrestrial serves as a gateway for psychic and spiritual emancipation; while, presumably, Yoshida's costumes, including Synthesizer Jacket and associated sci-fi garb, represent these extraterrestrials.



Video Still from Synthesizer Jacket #2, July 28, 1976. Courtesy Gary Jacquemin, Midori Yoshida, and Ulterior Gallery

Two performances shown in the exhibition share their title with this manifesto: *Absolute Landscape #3 (Phyctic Revolution)*. In them, language appears to become a central theme. In one, Yoshida scribes, using brush and black ink, across a large scroll of paper, covering it with an assortment of random words in kanji (Chinese characters adopted in Japanese writing systems). He then cocoons himself in the paper scroll and, enrobed in ribbons of text, he rolls on the ground. Performed at night, the audience's flashlights pick out this caterpillar-like mass of writing as it inches its way towards a nearby wall, its loose skin of inked paper unravelling and dragging along the sidewalk. In the other work—also performed at night and lit by flashlights, however now in an abandoned hotel—Yoshida is accompanied by two female extraterrestrials. As the jacket diffuses its electronic soundscape, Yoshida draws large kanji characters in sand on the ground. Meanwhile, one female performer calls out words in Japanese, while the other does the same in English.

Shown here at Ulterior Gallery are also reproductions of Yoshida's grids of kanji, which reveal a sample assortment of words he used. Upon reading the words there appears to be no distinct link between them. This perhaps indicates Yoshida's investment not in the words' content, but rather in the mechanisms of language itself. As the document on *Epicurism of Space Universe* states, extraterrestrials are fundamentally linked to "emptiness," and "poetic creation is automatic." Following Yoshida's own logic, these language games might be empty of content, even while they attempt to provide opportunity for alternative modes of automatic poetic thinking; they enable chance encounters between words, between synthesized sounds, and between performing bodies.

A more bizarre motif in the works is that of the baby doll: while Yoshida's text explains the similarity between babies and "empty" extraterrestrials, performers in one video discover an old baby doll in the sand, and two additional pencil drawings in the exhibition show giant babies floating amongst rocks. Yoshida's works at Ulterior Gallery could potentially be dismissed as unrelatable and unsubstantial sci-fi fantasy, inextricable from the strange seventies intergalactic fashions. However, there may be a more fruitful consideration of this body of work when considering Yoshida's position as a migrant artist at that time.

When Yoshida arrived in New York in 1970, his new citizen status as an "alien" coincided with his use of the very term to brand himself in Japan the year prior. An outsider, faced with a language barrier, his work embraced the extra-terrestrial as both a persona and a fertile ground for exploration. In *Poetics of Relation* (1997, translated by Betsy Wing), the philosopher



Minoru Yoshida, *Space Doll*, September 25, New York, 1974. Graphite and watercolor on paper, 29 1/2 x 22 inches. Courtesy Ulterior Gallery.

Édouard Glissant discusses his concept of a “poetics of depth,” or when man realizes “inner space is as infinitely explorable as spaces of the earth.” The plight is then to delve into the “abysses man carries within himself,” a poetics of “language-in-itself.” This excessive proliferation of language in Yoshida’s work may signal to us a more purposeful, solemn intent that contrasts with the more whimsical space aesthetic. Perhaps we ought to read Yoshida’s extraterrestrials not as travellers of geographical, physical, or literal space and time, but of internal, psychic distances. Read in this way, Yoshida’s insistence that his alien figures have arrived at a balance between “the internal landscape (Mind) and the external landscape (Cosmos)” provides a richer meaning.

James Baldwin, writing in 1962, explained the role of the artist as someone who willingly cultivates a state of being alone. The artist, for Baldwin, must be determined to “conquer the great wilderness of himself.” Isolated from the world around them, “he is his own test tube, his own laboratory.” Yoshida, the self-determined alien, enshrouds himself in his native tongue, many miles from home. Displaced geographically, he steps into the abyss of language. His laboratory, armed only with a synthesizer jacket, becomes a fantasy world of alien characters; a place where poetry happens by way of play, and self-exploration by way of science fiction. These recently discovered works by Yoshida are a timely reminder for us to value our migrant artists and the strange but wonderful languages that become unique to each of them. Yoshida’s travels to New York produced a vocabulary of alien life and synthesized sounds that blends his geographical exploration with self-exploration. His position as a migrant body aligns with both that of the extraterrestrial, and also that of the artist.

CONTRIBUTOR

George Kan

GEORGE KAN is an artist, writer, and performance maker from London, now based in New York. He holds a BA in Art History (Cambridge, UK) and an MA in Performance Studies (Tisch, New York).