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The Use of Images in the Music Gallery

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In March 2010, the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka (hereinafter “Minpaku”) renovated its Music Gallery. One of the features of this new exhibition was its extensive use of video images. In this paper, I will discuss the background context in which this exhibition came to be envisioned.

1. A Historical Overview of Minpaku’s Use of Video Images

Minpaku opened its galleries to the general public in November 1977. While Minpaku has emphasized the role of films and videos in cultural anthropological research since the time of its inception, in the museum, it adhered to a policy of not bringing moving images into areas reserved for the exhibition of objects. Instead, video images were made available in our “Videothèque” (National Museum of Ethnology 1984: 234). The videos available for public viewing in the Videothèque are programs that have been logically organized along certain themes, with the addition of conceptual explanations through the use of narration or subtitles. These programs are visual equivalents to compact books compiled on individual themes (Kurita 2000: 61).

The introduction of video images into areas previously reserved for objects started in 1996. In conjunction with the completion of a new exhibition wing, the Audio-Visual Gallery, Materiatheque,¹⁾ and South Asia Exhibition were all newly established, and our existing Southeast Asia Exhibition underwent renewal. Video images were incorporated into all these exhibitions.

In the Audio-Visual Gallery, which was equipped with a large screen made up of sixteen displays, we had produced and displayed programs that explained cultural anthropological concepts such as “culture” and “ethnicity” that were difficult to express in object exhibitions. In the Materiatheque, when visitors picked up an object and brought it into the vicinity of a device dubbed “Dr. Minpaku,” a video explaining the object was played (National Museum of Ethnology 2006: 230–231; 391–393). In the South Asia Exhibition, programs explaining the formation of mandalas and the concepts they represent could be viewed on a large screen. All of these videos were programs that had been edited to provide explanations. In that respect, we can say that they were not fundamentally different from the videos available in the Videothèque.

The videos added to the Southeast Asia Exhibition had a different character from these. They featured performances of the Javanese shadow-puppet theater from Indonesia



Photo 1 *Wayang kulit* video in the Southeast Asia Exhibition. The video of the shadow was projected on the main screen while the video of the puppeteers manipulating the puppets was played in the foreground (Image by the author, 2013)

known as *wayang kulit*. Full performances of *wayang kulit* begin at around eight or nine o'clock in the evening and can last until near dawn of the following day. Thus, the seven hours for which Minpaku is open to the public each day corresponds almost exactly to the length of a *wayang kulit* performance. I wanted to use a video to show a full night of a *wayang kulit* performance. This video offers neither an explanation of cultural anthropological concepts nor a commentary on the exhibited objects. My idea was to use a video as an exhibition material to showcase the various movements and sounds as they occur in the *wayang kulit* performance. However, at the time, I was shooting 16mm film, which made it difficult to record for extended periods of time, and we were ultimately unable to realize this plan. In the end, we recorded an abridged 30-minute performance from both the shadow side and the puppeteer side and put these two movies on display in the gallery, where they could be watched simultaneously (Photo 1).²⁾

Later, in 1999, the Minpaku Digital Guide was introduced (see Kurita 2000).³⁾ This was a device that provided short video commentaries of around two minutes in length about specific exhibition materials. The guides, which were loaned to interested visitors free of charge, were positioned as devices to provide supplemental information about the complete exhibitions, rather than as essential parts of the exhibitions themselves.

Keeping in mind the examples above, the videos found in Minpaku's exhibitions can be categorized into the following three types. The first are videos that constitute part of an exhibition; the second are videos that provide supplementary information about the exhibition, mainly through the interface of the Minpaku Digital Guide; and the third are videos that are independent of the object exhibitions themselves, mainly those available in the Videotheque. Moreover, we can think of the videos in the first category as being further divisible into two categories, namely, explanatory videos and videos as materials

that portray movements and sound. In practice, however, the videos used in the exhibitions do not fall quite so neatly into these two categories but are better said to possess both characteristics in a certain balance.

2. Use of Images in the Music Exhibition

Just as the world's musical instruments come in various shapes and designs, the rhythms and melodies they produce are similarly diverse. The manifold ways that human beings play these instruments cannot be conveyed by an exhibition of objects alone. In Minpaku's Music Gallery renovated in 2010, in order to convey the diversity of the music produced by these instruments, we recorded videos in many parts of the world in addition to collecting materials. As a result, in nearly every corner, visitors can now watch videos of performances featuring the musical instruments exhibited.

We also placed an emphasis on photographs. Even among images, still images will differ in quality from moving images. Whereas moving images are suitable for conveying motion and sound, photographs are a medium that allow us to capture a single instant. Still images are appropriate for visually capturing details such as how instruments are held or the settings in which they are played. Videos and photographs are not merely tools with which to supplement the exhibition of objects; rather, just like the musical instruments, they are themselves exhibition materials that convey the "music" produced by human beings in a multifaceted manner. Accordingly, it is our belief that it makes a great deal of sense to exhibit objects, videos, and photographs together as a set.

In the course of working out the plan of the exhibition, we received advice that it would be effective to gather all of the videos together in a single spot where they could be viewed on a large screen. If we were to consider solely viewing the videos as the objective here, then this certainly might be preferable. Nevertheless, we ultimately decided to position the videos as elements constituting parts of the exhibition corners that make up the exhibition. Music is born of human performance. Musical instruments also have meaning in this context, and by exhibiting musical instruments together with videos, we aimed to show the multi-dimensionality and scope of music as an element of culture that neither objects nor videos could express on their own (see Fukuoka 2013).

3. Challenges Involved in the Use of Images in Exhibitions

In the Music Gallery, we have positioned videos as materials comprising part of the exhibition, just like the objects. Unlike the objects, however, videos placed in the gallery have the characteristic of temporally restraining viewers. For this reason, a large number of video clips have been edited into pieces generally less than two minutes in length. However, these short video clips sometimes lead to a sense of frustration in that one cannot fully appreciate the music being played. To address this, we have arranged for the longer versions of the videos presented in the Music Gallery to be available for visitors to watch in the Videothèque.

The second challenge is the issue of sound. Many visitors prefer to browse through



Photo 2 A speaker has been placed in the black tube in the middle of the foreground. As well as preventing sounds from traveling farther than necessary, the sounds can also be heard distinctly by bringing one's ears close to the tube (Image by the author, 2017)

the museum's exhibitions calmly in a quiet environment. For such people, the atmosphere of the Music Gallery may not be well received. In addition, other sounds can be a nuisance to those who want to listen carefully to the audio of a specific video. While the use of headphones is one option, we prioritized avoiding the impracticality of encouraging visitors to wear headphones in every exhibition section. Instead, we developed a solution whereby we placed speakers in tubes so that museum visitors could listen to a desired sound by bringing their ears close to the upper ends of the tubes (Photo 2). However, this has not completely solved the issue.

The third challenge is the maintenance and updating of video playback equipment. While displays and speakers can be used for a relatively long period of time, the lifespan of playback equipment is comparatively limited. Although we chose equipment that would be the least likely to break down, we have not been able to avoid such issues completely. In 2017, seven years after the gallery opened, it had already become necessary to replace some of the equipment.

Few other museums have recorded so many videos around the world corresponding to the musical instruments in their exhibitions or made these available for public view in their galleries. While it is true that we face some challenges, we also hope that many visitors will find enjoyment in our Music Gallery.

Notes

- 1) The Audio-Visual Gallery was closed in 2002 and the Materiatheque was abolished in 2005 because the equipment could no longer be maintained.

- 2) This exhibition was replaced in the renewal in 2015.
- 3) The first Guide was replaced by the second generation Guide in 2007.

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