

TOSHIO MATSUMOTO

EVERYTHING VISIBLE IS EMPTY

The late filmmaker and theorist Toshio Matsumoto (1932–2017) was a seminal figure of the 1960s Japanese avant-garde movement, and worked in the ranks of graphic designer Tadanori Yokoo and Jikken Kobo (Experimental Workshop). In his video *Everything Visible Is Empty* (1975), *katakana* and *kanji* drawn from a Buddhist prayer appear in a sequence of fast-paced frames spliced with images depicting the Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, ending with flashes of color and light. This work is the namesake of an exhibition mounted at Hong Kong's Empty Gallery that surveys Matsumoto's postwar creations. The career of the pioneer, striving to lead the vanguard in documentary practice, is traced through a selection of eight of his experimental endeavors and two made-for-TV documentaries.

Matsumoto and his contemporaries contended with the popularization of television and mediated news spectacles, though a brief contextual introduction at Empty Gallery removed that framework, leaving visitors with the feeling of displacement from historicity. The show, presented through a maze of rooms, was bookended by *White Hole* (1979) and *Black Hole* (1977). The former refers to a hypothetical space that cannot be entered from the outside, and the latter points to one that cannot be breached once inside.

The show was terrifying. Matsumoto's experimental videos have fast zooms and flash frames, whereas the documentaries deliberately bring inanimate stones and looms to life. Audio tracks bled into one another. There was no escape from the noise of continual crisis, which sounded like it was from another era that was experiencing information overflow, and visitors had no say in what we could see and hear. In the gallery space, the conditions for anonymous, collective viewership are designed into the almost-pitch-black rooms, and the only light within view was cast by projectors and the occasional strobe. This mirrored the hushed theater environments where Matsumoto's work is primarily shown, as well as the auteur's penchant for immediacy, seen in works created during the 1960s and '70s, when he turned to performance to return a sense of the present to cinematic practices.

In February 1968, an ethnic Korean man created a hostage crisis in Sumatayko in southern Japan. Two months later, the filmmaker made *For the Damaged Right Eye*. Simulating the effect of reading a newspaper, Matsumoto appropriates newsreel footage of this "theatrical crime"—a criminal act performed to raise awareness for the discrimination that Koreans face in Japan—and intersperses it with clips of street-level political actions, a man dressing in drag, and youth reveling in Japanese nightlife. Among the films selected for the presentation, this short was shown closest to its



original design, with three overlaid projections and timed strobe lights.

One character from *For the Damaged Right Eye* makes appearances in Matsumoto's videos in the following years, including his most well-known feature-length film, *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969), and the much more experimental videos *Ecstasis* (1969) and *Expansion* (1972). He is named Guevara, and is recognized by his mustache and beard, as well as arms that stretch out toward the viewer in iconic shots. In these films, he is the ringleader of an artist group, and is named after the Argentine-Cuban revolutionary for his facial hair, which turns out to be fake, a metaphor for the social lesson that gestures should not be taken at face value. A similar message is also present in *Atman* (1975)—a Hindu word that roughly refers to one's true self. The 12-minute sequence shows a figure donning an *oni* (devil) mask, and contains references to the essence that underlies existence.

In one of Matsumoto's black-and-white documentaries, *The Weavers of Nishijin* (1961), the director extracted meaning from the actions and products of traditional Japanese craftsmen, describing lines of silk within a loom like "the rain of memories," and shaped the film in a style that rebelled against the superficiality of commercial cinema. Two years later, the artist made *The Song of Stone* (1963), in which he looked to the Japanese stonemason's adage that said stones were "coming to life" as they were polished, suggesting that filmmakers should adopt the same attitude when working with moving images.

"Everything Visible Is Empty" paid tribute to the late artist by asking how we should deal with decontextualized or even concealed information. Matsumoto stepped away from the premise that what you see is what you know, fabricating worlds in his films where, instead, our instincts lead us forward.

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