

## ***Mitate*: realising playfulness, multiple viewpoints and complexity in device art**

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*Mitate* is a widely known Japanese tradition. It is a conscious act of showing/seeing a thing from a different viewpoint. The concept was further developed into an art of representation. While it is based on the universal human capability of imagination and association, *mitate* is a cultural phenomenon. As a part of the Device art project, since 2005, which seeks a new form of media art that goes beyond the art world, the author has analyzed 'Japanese' elements in today's media art. Through the analysis it is understood that *mitate* adds multiple layers of meanings to artworks in playful manner, and serves to open up interaction between the artwork and its interactors': it is similar to metaphor but its notion is wider and multifaceted.<sup>1</sup> This paper discuss the relationship between playfulness and *mitate*.

### **What Is *Mitate*?**

*Mitate* is a way of using metaphors, associations, appropriation, simulation and double meanings - often in a playful manner - to (re-)present and read/imagine alternative meanings behind the real/physical (and often normal or unimportant) objects or scenes.<sup>2</sup> Since *mitate* allows an interpretation very different from what was originally meant, it may function as a way of hacking or satire: an important or sacred figure would be interpreted as figures such as a prostitute or a daily utensil. The word first appears in *Kojiki*, which was supposedly published in early 8<sup>th</sup> Century. (Aoki 1996: 42)<sup>3</sup> The idea is widely spread in Japanese culture, as can be seen with flower arrangement, *bonsai*, and gardens.<sup>4</sup> Masao Yamaguchi points out various examples of *mitate* in religious ceremonies. (Yamaguchi 1996: 5-6) *Mitate* is widely used in

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<sup>1</sup> In Western art, paintings based on allegory or symbolism and works by artists such as Archimboldo are close to *mitate*, but optical illusions in general do not belong to *mitate*.

<sup>2</sup> Diagnosis by a medical doctor is also called *mitate*, especially when it has a rather temporary nature, although another Chinese character is often applied. Choosing a right kimono for someone is also called *mitate*. The act involves suggesting, guessing, and imagining the right choice.

<sup>3</sup> Aoki classifies *mitate* into different combinations of assimilation (association) and simulation (copy).

<sup>4</sup> *Ryoanji* Temple in Kyoto is a known example. Other gardens offer virtual travel through classic literature with suggestively arranged stones, trees, etc.

literature including *haiku*.<sup>5</sup> The nature of *mitate* is in the fun of offering and discovering a surprisingly different meaning behind the presented reality. Clues are cleverly placed, while interpretation is open to each viewer.

The term was consciously used in Edo era (1600-1868) especially in *kabuki* and woodblock print. Part of the reason for *mitate* was the severe control on entertainment. Depicting contemporary and actual themes was strictly forbidden. To avoid legal conflicts, art of *mitate* achieved its maximum complexity in the late Edo era, while its inventiveness and playfulness became an attraction in itself.<sup>6</sup> The intellectual interplay was enjoyed among townspeople and in numerous books and prints. *Mitate* in tea ceremony is defined as:

Sen no Rikyu using his outstanding aesthetic sense, decided the form of tea utensils and also brought into chanoyu objects which were not originally made for it. This was called 'mitate'. The word 'mitate' means 'to see an object, not in the form that was originally intended for it, but as another thing', (...) Rikyu really brought this spirit of 'mitate', which came from literary theory, to life by using everyday household articles as utensils for chanoyu.<sup>7</sup>

Besides the gourd appropriated into a flower vase by Rikyu, a well-known example is normal rice bowls from Korea, which were 'discovered' to be perfectly suited for serving tea. The 'found' object needs to be aesthetically interesting and fully functional, while the gap between its purported use, and the newly discovered use, brings an excitement.

### **Playfulness and *mitate* in Device art**

Japanese media artworks have often been criticized as being 'too playful'. However, playfulness is in the origin of media art.<sup>8</sup> Playfulness in Japanese media art reflects both historical reasons and contemporary popular culture (Kusahara, 2007: 277-307; Screech 1996). Device art considers playfulness a positive feature that enables bringing artworks outside museums and galleries, including being commercial products. (Kusahara 2008: 275-279)

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<sup>5</sup> Akira Amagasaki analyzes various types of *mitate* in literature in *Nihon-no Retorikku*.

<sup>6</sup> *Tsukurimono* (or *tsukurimon*) was such an example of sideshow in late Edo era.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.omotesenke.jp/english/chanoyu/6\\_3\\_1.html](http://www.omotesenke.jp/english/chanoyu/6_3_1.html), *Chanoyu* means tea ceremony.

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Duchamp's works often contain playfulness, as in case of *L.H.O.O.Q.*, or *The Fountain*. Nam June Paik also had a playful approach combined with a critical attitude.

Novmichi Tosa (Maywa Denki) has used *mitate* extensively since 1993 in developing a variety of mechanical/robotic instruments and gadgets that comment on the relationship between technology, society, and our life. For example *Na-Code*, an electric cable in a shape of fishbone, visualizes electricity with its dangerous side - which we tend to forget. The name has a double meaning that suggests the commercially available product is a 'go-between' that connects us to the industry, as well as to the artist.<sup>9</sup> The complex set of metaphors, associations and wordplays form a playful *mitate* that enables bringing together two totally different things – an electric cable and a fishbone – in a creative manner. One of Tosa's projects is 'life with Maywa Denki', which promotes use of Maywa Denki's devices in everyday life. It is neither a conceptual proposition nor an installation meant for a museum or a collector. People can buy products such as Na-Code from online or offline shops to become Maywa Denki users. These objects placed in one's private room or house will function as devices for *mitate*, similar to rocks in a Japanese garden.

Sachiko Kodama creates dynamic sculptures using ferrofluid, a material developed at NASA in 1960s. With 'Protrude, Flow' (2002), as electromagnets react to the surrounding sound, the heavy black liquid transforms quickly into sharp spikes, bubbles, etc. Here the artist appropriated the industrial material as an artistic one, while viewers transform the physical phenomenon into an artistic experience through their own *mitate*. The gap between the industrial material and the beauty it creates produces a sense of wonder. While association is open to each viewer, the artist has designed the device with knowledge about viewers' imagination and artistic authority. The whole process is similar to Rikyu's gourd flower vase.

Hiroo Iwata applies *mitate* in a twisted manner. 'Feel Your Brain' (2008) measures one's brain activity with near-infrared spectroscopy (NIRS) and transmits the data in real time on a thermal display in the shape of brain. This is the person's own brain according to *mitate*, and can be held on his/her lap and felt by both hands. The piece is a continuation of Iwata's earlier work 'Floating Eye', with which one's sight is replaced by a camera attached on a blimp which the person carries above his/her head - realising the McLuhanian extension of body using latest technologies.

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<sup>9</sup> Tosa produced a video showing how Na-Code is 'mass-produced' in an old fashioned family operated 'factory', which overlaps with his father's company Maywa Denki. The original Maywa Denki went bankrupt in 1970s as it lost market share against big companies.

Kazuhiko Hachiya also employs *mitate* in many of his works. 'ThanksTail' (1996), which was commercialized by a car accessory manufacturer in 2004, is a communication device for car drivers. Attached on the rear of a car and remotely controlled from the driver's seat, the tail-like device wags to express 'thank you' or 'sorry' to another driver. The artist had thought of a friendly communication device for drivers - to change the current driving culture, and which had been missing from car design. Hachiya designed a prototype and uploaded it on his website with a call for a production partner. Creating a museum piece was not his goal and thanks to the rapid development of inexpensive wireless communication technology, the idea was realized after eight years.

While the mechanical device does not look exactly like an animal's tail the association is clear to anyone. The artist uses shared images and knowledge amongst people, such as a car being associated with animals (which is a cliché in advertising) or how friendly dogs wag their tails, in order to establish a visual communication using the device. At the same time the unexpected combination of a car and a tail brings guesses, laughter, and probably happy conversations afterwards, even for the passers-by. Similar to what woodblock prints did with *mitate* with people in Edo, 'ThanksTail' brings discoveries and fun to people, as well as being an inventive communication tool and the artist's critical thinking on automobile society.

## **Conclusion**

*Mitate* enables creating multiple layers on an artwork. It also allows an open space for viewers/interactors to explore what an artwork could signify. Its playful nature fits with Device art, and is effective in bringing artworks outside museums and galleries. While not all artworks are playful, playfulness could be positively explored in media art. *Mitate* makes it possible to combine playfulness with critical themes with multiple layers, maintaining the value of the playful surface - like the art of wrapping - which is still very important in Japanese culture.

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