

# Making Art as Commercial Products: An Ongoing Challenge of Device Art

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## Introduction

Could a person produce a funny gadget as a commercial product and still be considered a serious artist? The answer was a big YES in Japan, among those who voted online to select Japan's best media artists for the 10th anniversary of Japan Media Arts Festival in 2006. Maywa Denki (which means Maywa Electric Company), conceived and performed by Nobumichi Tosa, won the honor of being voted the most appreciated media artist today. Tosa developed a series of machines and gadgets such as robotic musical instruments, puppets, and techno jewelries from fish-bone shaped cell phone straps (which is a miniature of his "Na-Code", a dangerously spiky electric cable) to large-scale computer controlled systems. He uses these music instruments, or "products" (since he is supposed to be the "CEO" of an old style company that produces electric and electronic parts and appliances in small scale), for performances and exhibitions, but small-scale items are also sold online and offline. Even Maywa workers' uniforms with the company logos are commercially available. When Maywa Denki's solo exhibition took place at InterCommunication Center in Tokyo, not only Maywa Denki "employees" but also museum guides wore the uniform, as well as some visitors, creating an interesting situation in which exhibitors and visitors were no longer distinguishable. His performances, which are called "product demonstrations", are extremely entertaining and always full with some in the audience wearing Maywa uniforms and wearable gadgets, which clearly reflects connection with Japanese popular culture such as "costume play". Is this convergence of art, design, entertainment and popular culture, as well as application of both low and high technology, a particularly Japanese phenomenon, or could it be an early example of what we will see worldwide?

Although Tosa's performances and products since 1993 have been funny and entertaining, he is an artist with strong concepts and social aspects. By staging as a small firm owner with a limited number of employees, inventing and producing small machines as he struggles in a society controlled by giant companies, he places

multiple layers of meanings in his works. But the top layer is always playful.

Tosa is not the only artist who creates works in a playful manner no matter how serious the underlying subject is. Such artists' playfulness is particularly visible in the way they deal with technology. Instead of criticizing technology from a negative perspective, they present it in an innovative and amusing way. And this playfulness is a key factor in commercializing their artworks. But then, why is mass-producing artwork for sale important to them?

Fast developing digital media technology has been changing our society and art activities. The "mass consumption" society we live in is supported by digital technology that allows limitless number of copies that are identical to the "original". Although digital technology has deeply influenced our audiovisual culture, its impact is limited in the art world where authenticity of an artwork in physical format remains a basic issue. Reproduction technologies are essential to certain art forms such as sculpture, print and photography; they are used to produce "limited edition" works for museums, galleries and collectors in order to keep the authenticity of "original" artworks. However, the distinction between "original" and "copy" is no longer clear in a digital media society. The traditional paradigm of art itself is in question.

This paper focuses on activities by artists who consciously create artworks as commercial products available outside museum shops, in relation to Device Art. The aim is to analyze the purposes and reasons why professional artists create their works as commercial products and how their choice is related to other features of their works in order to understand what commercializing artworks means today.

## Device art — the concept

Device Art is a concept derived from digital media art and technology scenes in Japan in recent years. As Japanese media artworks become internationally known,

their features such as playfulness, hardware-based original interface design, and open interaction are widely observed in contrast to typical works from the West. The tendency is particularly visible in the case of interactive art. While Japanese artists are often criticized in the West for making their works too entertaining without clearly showing a critical attitude toward technology, analyzing and understanding the underlying reason is needed not only to understand these artworks but also to achieve an alternative viewpoint of what art means today. Thus the Device Art Project was launched in Fall 2005 by a group of artists and researchers to investigate what the abovementioned approach could bring to both media art and technology.

In Device Art, an artwork is realized in a form of device, the device becoming the content itself. This feature allows small-scale works to be published as commercial products free of maintenance. An artistic concept is realized by designing a system or a gadget that would allow a user to achieve a certain experience of what media and media technology mean to us today. Using both latest and everyday technologies and materials, these works playfully visualize the media environment we live in from different angles. The concept reflects Japanese cultural traditions in many ways, including appreciation of refined tools and materials, love for technology, acceptance of playfulness, absence of clear distinctions between art, design and entertainment, among other issues. At the same time it is part of an international phenomenon that questions boundaries between art and its related fields including low-tech, do-it-yourself, and major art exhibitions in the past few years concerning the convergence of art, design, and architecture. Questioning the validity of the traditional value system in art supported by strategies such as “limited edition” or “signed by artist” means also questioning the boundary between art and design.

## **Artists producing commercial products**

Besides Tosa, Kazuhiko Hachiya and Ryota Kuwakubo are Device Art Project members who have produced their

works as commercial products. Hachiya’s “ThanksTail” is a mechanical doggy tail to be attached to a car roof, with which the driver can tell “thanks” or “sorry” to other drivers by wagging it remotely. The artist has a long history of producing artworks questioning what communication means to us, including net projects and the internationally exhibited “Inter DisCommunication Machine”. For him, exhibiting “ThanksTail” at a gallery space was not the goal. The concept was to offer a functional platform for drivers to discover and enjoy a new communication language. Therefore the item had to be mass produced and commercialized, sold at car accessory shops for the general public. This means the product has to be professionally manufactured in order to meet legal standards for safety and to be sold through a regular distribution channel. Since an artist cannot “mass” produce, sell, and maintain such products, partnership with commercial firms was the key to realize the project.

In the case of Toshio Iwai’s Tennorion, the artist wanted to offer a device that any user could enjoy to play one’s own music and image. It is a logical development of works the artist has developed over the years on both his original and commercially available platforms such as the cell phone or game machine. The only way to mass produce, distribute and maintain the product is to collaborate with a commercial firm. Even at the prototyping stage, collaboration with engineers is required to create a working model for the real production process. To be marketed to the general public through a commercial channel, a product should be attractive. This is why playfulness plays an important role in bringing an artwork to the public through commercial channels. While works exhibited at museums and galleries could be seen only by a limited number of people who already have the intention to “see art”, these artworks, or art products, have the potential to reach a wider audience. In a society where digital media has become the most important channel of communication for many, these artists attempt to respond to reality, challenging the existing paradigm of art.