

Retro-Utopia Foreclosed: Antony Cairn's MaViCa CTY

by Duncan Forbes

In his MaViCa CTY Antony Cairns suspends forty Sony Mavica digital cameras in mid-air as their LCD screens shuffle images intermittently and emit a bluish glare. The bodies of the cameras are plastic, hefty by today's measure, but by no means unwieldy. Hanging at various heights, they are lent a certain weightlessness by the animated radiance of their robotic glow.

As the viewer approaches, the screens assume greater definition, revealing a maze of cityscapes constantly changing. They are shot using the Mavica itself, always at night, and abstracted through the saturation of light and colour. Ostensibly depicting the streets of Tokyo, the images prove difficult to locate in space and time. Their viewpoints are obscured by the harsh backlighting and pixelisation of the camera's LCD display, an effect at once disorienting and mesmeric. Devoid of people, and delineated by an electronic blur, the bustling here and now of the Japanese city dissolves into an ill-defined futurity. Low resolution becomes content and form. As the digital reels advance, any lingering sense of place succumbs to shimmering hallucination.

In his MaViCa CTY Cairns constructs an assemblage of cameras with their embedded screen images, disrupting the traditional separation of photographic apparatus and exhibited media. Devoid of an eyepiece and ocular lens, the Mavica's screen is both viewfinder and playback device, a technical innovation drawn from the launch of the Camcorder a few years' earlier. Commanding the back of the camera, the 2.5-inch screen enables the live relay of vision framed by the camera's lens. Crucially, the Sony Mavica looks both ways: out into the world, the purveyor of a scene observed; but also back at the viewer, a projector of the scene surveyed.

This alternation of vision – and perhaps, too, a rerouting of the gaze – lends an aura of unease to the assemblage's eery glow. Indeed, it is hard to shake off the feeling that the screens – a host of digital cyclopes – are staring back at us as we view them. This sense of haunting is further enhanced by a temporal switch as MaViCa CTY looks both to the past and to the future. The cameras point backwards to the mass market origins of digital photography and a device soon overtaken by the speed of algorithmic change. At the same time, the artist's photographs, with their blurred and timeless cast, have a distinctly utopian feel. MaViCa CTY is Janus-faced, a time capsule that pulls in two directions. Together, the apparatus and its images take on the form of what might be termed a retro-utopia.

Mavica Mania

With its obsolescence the Sony Mavica swiftly assumed cult status. Prototyped as early as 1981, it hit the mass market in 1997 with two models, the MVC-FD5, bearing a fixed lens, and the MVC-FD7 with a 10x optical zoom. Mavica's name derived from 'magnetic video camera' and its images, stored in standard JPEG format, were initially recorded onto a 1.44MB (3.5 inch) floppy disk inserted into the side of the camera, an apogee of industrial design. The FD5 could only handle stills, but subsequent models allowed for short video bursts. From 2000, Sony introduced its own proprietary flash storage appropriately named the Memory Stick.

Depending on the complexity of the image and the compression selected, the photographer could record up to twenty photographs on the disk, a process that would take up to eight seconds for a single image with a similar timespan for playback. As the disk's magnetic head stepped from track to track it made a familiar ratcheting sound, a sonic landscape which combined with an affirmative beep as the photographer clicked through the camera's rudimentary on-screen menu.

Sony sold over one million Mavicas in various formats, catching the wave of the Dotcom Bubble before its dramatic collapse after the turn of the new Millennium. Without doubt, the short-lived commercial power of the Mavica was driven by its seamless integration with the burgeoning realm of home computing: photographs were easily transferred via floppy disk to a computer from which they could then be digitally distributed, manipulated or printed. However, by 2003 the Sony Mavica had been discontinued, displaced by exploding image file sizes and the rapid extension of flash memory.

Twenty-odd years later, the fascination with the Sony Mavica is more evidently nostalgic. An apparent 'origin' for digital photography, the machine's aesthetic is enticing and reassuringly operable. After inserting a floppy, there is

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something miraculous about holding such nascent digital technology – reverberating with all its beeping and clicking – in your hands. Arguably, the Mavica is best celebrated for its quality (in several senses) of *compression*. Indeed, reading between the lines of the various Internet blogs now devoted to the camera, it is the retroactive speed of its supersession that fuels the fandom. The Mavica feels simultaneously ancient and modern.

Hauntologies

The valences of the Mavica are crucial to MaViCa CTY, not least the temporal entanglement that governs the camera's history and its contemporary reception. Cairns' assemblage works to collapse temporal longing – for a past that is not yet over and a future that will never come. It is an instance, to borrow Mark Fisher's resonant term, of 'hauntology', less a haunting of the present by the past, than a pervasive cultural condition whereby the present feels haunted by lost futures.

For Fisher, late twentieth-century capitalism killed off any sense of progressive social change as economic and political stagnation forestalled alternatives. However, rather than shutting the future down completely, culture began to recycle the past, particularly the aesthetic signatures of earlier eras that retained a utopian charge. By the 1990s, a vibrant post-1960s popular modernism (expressed particularly for Fisher in music) had diminished to a 'formal nostalgia'. As he put it in his book *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), what haunts us 'is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of futures that popular modernism trained us to expect, but which never materialised'.

Past Provocations

Enchanted by popular modernism's photographic legacies, MaViCa CTY manifests a further relay of this hauntological imagination. The spectres in this case are Japanese, 'embodying' past traces of a future that might have been. Thus, Cairns' photographs reference earlier instances of the overexposed city, most notably the efforts of the Provoke photographers from the late 1960s, and perhaps especially Takuma Nakahira, to delineate the tumultuous effects of modernisation in Japan. *Provoke*, a self-published zine, emanated from a ferment of urban change. Its three editions, printed full bleed in inky halftone and rotogravure to forge a dense flow of images, strained to record the city's dizzying sensorium. The stolid certainties of 1950s' realism were feverishly displaced by a neo-avant-gardism that pushed photography to the edge of legibility.

However, arguably, by the early 1970s, Nakahira's photography was already hauntological as the vibrant (and violent) student protests of the previous decade were rapidly crushed. Nonetheless, his bleak and blown out Tokyo streetscapes, filtered by the aesthetic of *are-bure-boke* (rough, blurred, out of focus), hinted at urban futures yet to come. Indeed, for Nakahira, his photography was avowedly utopian, an image (so he imagined) without a code. To quote the title of his portentous photo book from 1970, he sought out a way of seeing that was always already future-oriented: Nakahira's photography was *For a Language to Come*.

Cairns, in turn, recycles Provoke's stalled urban utopianism, redoubling its emotional lure as he relays his images via the Mavica screen. This amplification is also a temporal connection played out across a timespan now illuminated by the faltering of Japanese modernisation in the late twentieth century. The Mavica, too, evokes a past that might have been, namely a digital utopia destroyed by the shattered economy of the 1990s. Across the decade, Japan's post-war economic miracle mutated into a zombie capitalism, its optimism displaced by the creative subcultures of escapism (anime and manga), youthful rebellion (*gyaru*) or an existential dread (*hikikomori*). The reassuring certainties of the salaryman evaporated and the future flatlined into the 'Lost Decades' of the twenty-first century.

Futures Foreclosed

MaViCa CTY, then, is a retro-utopia that haunts our present. Its temporal charge plays out across a layered aesthetic register of blasted hopes. For Cairns, the potent carrier of temporal longing is obsolescent media technologies, seen elsewhere in his practice through his use of early computer punch cards, discarded electronic tablets, outmoded video monitors of various kinds, old photographic processes like collotype, as well as 35mm film. In his artworks these jettisoned or neglected technologies are substrates of time, illuminating his cityscapes with a utopian charge not yet totally forgotten. It is less the layering of material object and image that is significant than their galvanising intersection, a connective pulse that releases the spectre of a lost future. And the specificity of each instance is vital: the blur of Tokyo on the Mavica's LCD screen becomes an echo of earlier (failed) utopian provocations.

The compression achieved by MaViCa CTY is thus also a sense of foreclosure, a haunting that emanates not from the lost origins of digital technology exactly, but rather from a future that was once imaginable but is now forestalled. Formally that foreclosure is expressed by the eeriness of the Mavica's pixelated screens, an excrescence of colour and light that struggles to register. Through their blurring of the streets of Toyko, the photographs conjure a distortion of temporal content that refuses either to look back to the past or to address the future. MaViCa CTY is neither simply nostalgic, nor is it invitingly utopian.

Instead, an impossible future is visible only awry, a hauntological glitch flickering across the screens of the Mavica. In this sense, Cairns' assemblage reflects Jacques Lacan's structure of the gaze, less a point of visual mastery than a mechanism – a screen – through which the subject is constructed by something invisible, by something beyond what is seen. MaViCa CTY, then, is also a barrier, a limit that compels our attention. It creates a torsion within the realm of the visible, a blur that resists resolution. This occlusion is constituted – in a structural, psychoanalytic sense – by the retroactive logic of desire. Photography's lost future appears as a seductive visual distortion within the here and now.

This, for me, is how we might 'locate' ourselves within the fantastic labyrinth of Cairn's MaViCa CTY. Its draw is not our longing for an archaic digital age, embodied by an endearingly clunky camera, or even a tantalising glimpse into the future. Rather, Cairn's assemblage stares back at us askance from every angle. The Mavica's pulsing screens gaze at us from places we can never quite locate, fuelling our desire with the promise of a future that never came.

Further Reading

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