

## Solo Animation in Japan: Empathy for the Drawn Body

Paul Roquet

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[141] This chapter examines small-scale and independently produced Japanese animation as a site of intensified engagement with the work of making drawn bodies move. I examine the afterlife of “independent” animation as an oppositional practice in a time when Japanese animation production as a whole is increasingly dependent on freelance and casualized labor (Mōri 2011: 34-36). Solo animation is now but one component of the increasingly hybrid trajectory of animation work in Japan today, where terms like “art” or “independent” are more likely to distinguish one part of an animator’s work from their other projects rather than designate an overall authorial stance or aesthetic style. I use the term *solo animation* here to designate works where the animation on screen is produced by a single person, though collaborators like musicians may (and often are) involved as well, and digital imaging software also plays an essential role. Solo animations are usually small-scale, self-produced projects, made for little money, and with little to no expectation of financial gain. A solo animation can be screened at festivals or online, win awards, generate new styles, and operate as a calling card for later commissioned work.<sup>1</sup> But solo productions also serve as a unique space for animators to reflect on their own animating labors: how the individual animator becomes subject to social

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<sup>1</sup> Shinkai Makoto’s early self-produced works (1999-2000) being the most famous examples here.

forces and demands, including the demands of the animation industry itself. Rather than attempt to define an aesthetics of solo animation in opposition to commercial anime, I follow animation scholar Doi Nobuaki in understanding animation genres as ultimately defined by technique rather than on-screen styles or industrial norms (Doi 2016: 59). In contrast to Doi's focus on the personal vision of the animator, however, this chapter explores how solo animations come to expressively mediate the flexible and precarious labors shaping their own production.

The first part of the chapter details my argument that what now distinguishes Japanese animations produced outside the bounds of the anime studios is no longer their independence vis-a-vis commercial products, but rather the way these individually-authored works often compel animators to directly confront the position of the individual within larger social and industrial systems. The remaining two parts of the essay focus on how this confrontation is perceptible in a set of key solo animation works. The second section, focusing on works by Wada Atsushi and Mizushiri Yoriko, examines bodily manipulation on a mechanical level. Here animation is imagined as one more mechanism for fitting bodies into the movement patterns of industrial and automated labor. The final section focuses on a hand-drawn music video by Kuno Yōko, tracing the disciplinary shaping of bodies at biological, affective, and even molecular [142] levels.

Through these reflections on how the solo animator's labor becomes transposed into animated form, I locate in this seemingly minor realm of Japanese animation a vital space for reimagining the laboring body (in the animation industry and beyond). What I find there is ultimately a space of empathy for those most vulnerable within these larger industrial systems. Solo animation creates a space for individual bodies struggling to achieve freedom of movement, even for a moment, amidst the weighty pressures and struggles of animation production itself.

## **Solo Animation in the Twenty-first Century**

As Doi has recently noted, while animation production has historically been organized around dichotomies (commercial vs. art, alternative, or independent animation; mainstream vs. experimental/avant-garde), upon closer inspection these terms rarely hold any precise meaning. Seeking to move away from these vague polarities, Doi describes small-scale, often self-produced animated works screened largely for international animation festival audiences as a more “personal” or “private” (*kojinteki*) form of animation, capable of more directly revealing the individual vision of the artist (Doi 2016: 26-29). This approach has strong echoes of P. Adams Sitney’s work on what he dubbed the “visionary” tradition of American avant-garde filmmakers like Jonas Mekas and Stan Brakhage (Sitney 2009) as well as *jishu* [autonomous] film practices in Japan (see Zahlten, this volume). Unfortunately this focus on a private vision means the dichotomy of art or independent versus commercial continues to structure the discourse, whatever term is actually used. Most contemporary English language writing on Japanese “art” or “independent” animation, such as Cathy Munroe Hotes’ long-running *Nishikata Film Review* blog, adopts a similar auteur-centered focus. While both Doi and Hotes’ contributions to the field are immensely valuable, these auteurist approaches limit the critical context to a relatively isolated circuit of individual artists and independent animation festivals, betraying the increasing integration of solo animation with other forms of media practice and material culture more broadly.

Vague or not, there was a time when these dichotomies were warranted, as animators in Japan self-consciously set themselves against a commercial studio production model. Japanese

independent animation as a conscious field of practice emerged in 1960 with the formation of the Animation Association of 3 (*Animēshon 3-nin no kai*), composed of Kuri Yōji, Yanagihara Ryōhei, and Manabe Hiroshi. Influenced by the experimental film and animation then being screened in Japan for the first time, such as the work of Canadian animator Norman McLaren, the Animation Association of 3 sought to stake out a space for a different kind of animated work. Whereas the existing commercial styles primarily targeted children, the Association's work engaged with mature themes for an adult audience. The Association broke with commercial styles to reimagine animation as a medium for more experimental and avant-garde work, circulated through the small-scale, boutique distribution channels of the festival circuit rather than in commercial cinemas or on broadcast television. Internationally, this independent animation community had only just begun to take shape. The Cannes film festival began to include a subsection dedicated to animation starting in 1956, and in 1960 this part of the festival broke off to start the world's first dedicated animation festival in Annecy, France. Inspired by McLaren and the warm reception of Kuri Yōji's films at the early Annecy festivals, Kuri and others began referring to their work with the English loanword *animēshon*, rather than the truncated *anime* or older Japanese terms like *manga eiga*. According to Kuri, this was still an unfamiliar word in Japanese at the time (Akiyama 1977: 129, cited in Doi 2016: 342fn19). If anime had by this time come to accrue particular commercial connotations, *animēshon* could still be reserved for "art" [*geijutsu*] (Doi 2016: 68-70).

[143] By the turn of the century, however, these divides were no longer so clear. Beginning in the late 1990s the turn to digital workflows through programs like Adobe Photoshop and After Effects allowed freelance animators to cross over into a wide range of other related fields,

including graphic design, motion graphics, special effects, advertising, and music videos. This period saw the rise to preeminence of the *eizō sakka* or “moving image creator,” a catchall term originally used in the 1980s to refer to filmmakers like Matsumoto Toshio and Kawanaka Nobuhiro who crossed over into video. In the new century, aided by the new digital tools, this kind of transmedia practice became not the exception but the rule, especially for freelance moving image creators hoping to stitch together a viable career. Wada Atsushi, for example, divides his website into “independent” and “client” works, with the latter including graphic design, mascot design, animated segments for live-action films, and animated sequences for broadcast television. More recently, following the success of David OReilly’s *Everything* (2017) solo animators have come to recognize video games as another alternate (and potentially more lucrative) outlet for their skills and creativity (Doi and Hirano 2017).<sup>2</sup> While not usually adopting the *eizō sakka* title, even the most “independent” of animators are now likely to recognize themselves as part of this expanded field of practice, and participate in both commercial and non-commercial work. Compared to earlier generations, they are also much more likely to have emerged from a formal animation studies program, such as the two-year Masters in Animation established at Tokyo University of the Arts in 2010. Meanwhile, well-established names in studio anime production are increasingly experimenting with small-scale productions and free online distribution in projects like Studio Khara and Dwango’s *Japan Anima(tor)’s Exhibition* (2014-2016).

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<sup>2</sup> OReilly originally focused on solo animation works, but transitioned into semi-interactive games with *Mountain* (2014) and the widely-lauded *Everything* (2017). Citing OReilly and other animators-turned-game makers like Michael Frei (*Plug & Play*, 2015), Doi has recently turned to focus on animation-inspired video games in his critical (Doi 2018) and curatorial activities, including producing Wada Atsushi’s first interactive work, *My Exercise* (2017-19).

This blurring of categories between art, independent, and commercial is clearly materialized at the annual Japan Media Arts Festival (1997-present), a government-sponsored promotion of Japanese contents industries where “media arts” came to be unusually (and somewhat controversially) expanded to include all fields “making use of digital technology,” including video games, manga, motion graphics, music videos, and animation alongside the computational gallery and museum-oriented works more commonly understood as “media art” (Schlachetzki 2012: 49). The main animators discussed below (Wada, Mizushiri, and Kuno) have all won major animation awards at this festival, where their solo work was exhibited alongside larger studio-based animation productions like *The Tatami Galaxy* and *Patema Inverted*.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, rather than continue to anachronistically position “independent” or “art” animation in stark opposition to more commercially-oriented work, I suggest it is rather the material conditions of its production that leads solo animation to a distinct set of aesthetic, thematic, and social concerns. In other words, I propose that what solo animation embodies is not the private vision of an autonomous creator, but rather a heightened sensitivity to the labor of animation production: a sensitivity that often turns the animations themselves into reflections on the social forces at work on the laboring body.

Solo animation often demands an intimate struggle with the tools of the animation trade: the physical instruments, techniques, environments, and above all the *work* necessary to make drawn bodies move. Even with the advent of digital imaging software, which has greatly simplified the image capture and editing process, animation remains an extremely labor-intensive exercise.

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<sup>3</sup> Wada’s *In a Pig’s Eye* won an Excellence Prize in 2010; Mizushiri’s *Futon* and Kuno’s *Airy Me* won the New Face award for emerging animators in 2012 and 2013, respectively.

What distinguishes solo animation is how this labor is always very close to the perceptible surface. The work of the hand is rendered visible in roughly drawn lines; the work of the voice is audible in the rough intimacy of the recorded soundtrack; the work of time spent is traced out in the sheer amount of detail present in every frame. Alongside these traces of the animator's body, the immediate materials of the animator's environment often reveal themselves too: the [144] furnishings of their working space, the texture and color of their drawing paper, the layered architecture of their software. All this is often transfigured into the forms taken by the animation itself, including its character design and narrative space.

This sometimes happens in larger studio-based animations too. But there, this fundamental grappling with the materiality of animated drawings tends to be glossed over in favor of a different kind of movement: the circulation of the commodity form. In larger studios, the production workflow integrates a wide spectrum of specialized labor, from character designers, colorists, and voice actors to producers and advertisers. Subcontracted animation teams, often based outside of Japan in countries with cheaper labor pools, are sometimes called in to work as "in-betweeners," filling in the cels between the "key frames" produced by the home studio.

Whether "full" or "limited," on a prestige or a shoestring budget, studio animation is articulated within the bounds of what enables this distributed workflow. Foreground and background layers, computer graphics, and so on might aesthetically cohere, but the workflow is designed so that different branches of the production team can work on these elements simultaneously. Forced to aim for efficiencies in production and much larger audience shares, studio animation rarely has time to linger on the intricate labor required to make drawings move.

While animation studios might measure their output in episodes and series, solo animators often work for months or even years on a single short-form work. It is this labor differential, above all else, that allows a different perspective on animation to emerge. Solo animators push up against the very limits of what animation can do as a technique for redrawing the world. What distinguishes solo animation practice is this production context, rather than any kind of absolute break in genre or artistic intent.

Animation is often quick to register changes in production methods and tools. As the important Japanese film theorist Imamura Taihei explored in his pioneering work on Disney in the 1940s, studio animation can be seen to absorb the factory logic of industrial society more generally.<sup>4</sup> The rise of television anime in postwar Japan pushed these factory models even further into the aesthetics of the animations themselves, particularly when it comes to character design. Going back to the early 1960s, commercial anime characters are often designed from the beginning to be imbued with what Marc Steinberg (2012: 44) has called “dynamic immobility.” This is the capacity for a fixed and easily recognizable character to move beyond the material constraints of the screen and be reproduced across a larger circulation of toys, stickers, manga, and other merchandise.

On an aesthetic level, industrial production methods put a premium on character designs that are relatively graphic and simple to draw, easily recognizable, and above all merchandisable.

Steinberg focuses here on Tezuka Osamu’s design for Astro Boy [*Tetsuwan atomu*], perhaps still

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<sup>4</sup> For more on Imamura’s complex take on the production of bodies in commercial animation, see Lamarre 2014.

the archetypal anime figure. We can also consider, however, how a character like Astro Boy not only models a body well suited to media circulation, but also in many ways embodies an ideal form of physicality for an age of industrialized labor. He is made of durable metal. He is atomic-powered, can fly, can swap out parts of his body as needed, and has a far greater capacity for work and resistance to fatigue compared to his human companions. In the first episode of the series we learn that Astro Boy was designed to replace his inventor's own son, a nine-year old boy who was killed in a car accident. Astro serves as a physical upgrade, replacing the frail human body with one of industrial strength. As we see with *Astro Boy*, studio anime responds to the demands of industrial society by becoming industrialized itself – both in its production *and* in its approach to embodiment. In this social context, figures like Astro Boy not only survive but thrive by leaving the fragility of the human body far behind. More recently, critics like Azuma Hiroki have pointed out the further transformation of these industrial efficiencies into the “database” structures of digital media, where vast ensembles of [145] swappable body parts and costume elements allow characters to proliferate for every taste, purpose, and utility (Azuma 2009). If Astro Boy models a way to survive the age of industrial production (by becoming industrial yourself), the character database upgrades these animated fortifications for a post-industrial age, rendering them flexible, customizable, and on-demand.

In contrast to these trajectories of physical transcendence, solo animations often push in the opposite direction, staying focused on the struggles of a fragile human body subject to the pressures of these same intensifying industrial and post-industrial demands. In other words, solo animations can be understood to explore what might happen if Astro's creator, instead of trying

to transcend mortality by shifting his affections to a robust nuclear robot, stayed with the human body in all its limits, vulnerability, and inevitable change.

Solo animation often sides with fleshy, weak, entropic bodies struggling to survive under regimes of mechanization, automation, and other forms of physical management and control.

Unlike the strong, seamless bodies of much studio anime, solo animators often present characters that can barely hold themselves together, but nonetheless strive to survive in contexts where the impersonal machinations of the environment seem to be conspiring against them. The characters' struggles echo the animators' own fate as solo producers attempting to carve out a space of survival within the pressures of the larger media industries. In what follows, I turn to explore a small number of award-winning works that directly engage with this dynamic.

### **Empathy for the Ritualized Routine**

Wada Atsushi's animations often feature mechanisms positioning individuals within assembly-line structures where characters regulate each other's movements and manipulate each other's bodies. In *Day of Nose* (2005), similarly attired male office workers shift from chair to chair in assembly line formation, until they reach an older bespectacled man at the front of the line. He uses one hand to pinch the nose of each worker, as if checking it for quality control. The protagonist submits to this physical inspection, but subsequently attempts to escape to a freer, more flexible form of embodiment. He follows the path of his predecessors to an adjacent wall, where he finds a small hole at about eye level. Squeezing himself through the hole leads him to a momentary break from gravity and the monotony of the assembly line: he floats and swims inside a seemingly liquid bubble expanding out of the hole on the other side of the wall. Before

long, however, the bubble enclosing him bursts. He falls rapidly to the ground far below, only to immediately find himself locked into a circular routine, this time holding hands with a mixed group of creatures acting out some kind of ritual around a black rock.

There are sequences like this in many of Wada's works. A whole vocabulary of physical movement emerges as triggers to these escapes: slipping, turning away, tumbling, swimming, floating and falling. The escapes lead to brief moments of buoyancy, weightlessness, and relative freedom of movement. The usually rudimentary animation suddenly becomes supple, a testament to the increased level of attention and labor animators devote to these frames. But it rarely lasts for long.

Studio animation often revels in similar scenes of bodily transcendence through flight and speed. But when drawn by a single individual, these flights of fantasy cannot sustain themselves for extended periods, limited as they are by the solo animator's own laboring capacity. For the solo animator, such freedom of movement on the page exacts a high price in time and energy spent. I have written elsewhere of solo charcoal animator Tsuji Naoyuki; his *A Feather Stare at the Dark* (1995-2003) maps this trajectory onto the myth of Icarus (Roquet 2014). A similar dream of escape and bodily transcendence flies Tsuji's protagonist right up close to the sun, but the sheer exhaustion of the animator's hand that draws him appears [146] to bring the character soon crashing back down to earth. Solo animation can stage a flight away from the industrial demands placed on the human body, but in its labor-intensive production the animator is always faced with the desk, the screen, and stacks of drawings which do not move themselves on their own.

Wada's animations introduce an interesting twist into this tension between factory-line mechanisms and the free flight of bodies. This is the obvious pleasure his animations take in a fetishistic focus on soft, subtle, ticklish sensations, whether in the fur of animals on the cheek, the hushed, whispered ASMR quality of the soundtrack, or the delicate and thin lines of his drawings.<sup>5</sup> These fixations become one strategy for deriving affective pleasure from the incessant repetition of these assembly-line situations (a repetition also inherent to the work of drawing frame after frame after frame). Consider a later scene from *Day of Nose*. The protagonist comes across a long line of grandfather figures, closely resembling one another, lying on their backs shoulder to shoulder down the slope of a hill. He immediately lies his head down on the first grandfather's stomach to have his head patted. Then he rolls to the left onto the next grandfather's stomach to receive another pat. Then the next, and the next, and the next, and so on. A flashback reveals what appears to be the original intergenerational moment from his childhood: his grandfather patting him on the head. The whole sequence works to transform the isolated pleasure of this physical intimacy into a repetitive, almost ritual gesture taken to absurdly mechanistic lengths.

Wada's sympathy for bodies subject to such social protocols often extends across trans-species lines, particularly to types of domesticated animals like pigs, rabbits, and sheep. Whereas earlier independent animators like Kuri Yōji parodied human domestication in works like *Clap Vocalism/Ningen Dōbutsuen* (Human Zoo, 1962), Wada, in contrast, demonstrates not just

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<sup>5</sup> ASMR stands for 'autonomous sensory meridian response,' or what Nitin Ahuja has defined as a "reliable low-grade euphoria in response to specific interpersonal triggers, accompanied by a distinct sensation of 'tingling' in the head and spine" (Gallagher 2016). Wada has spoken of his interest in producing and enjoying similar low-grade ticklish sensations using the language of fetish. See the interview at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZL6X5mK844> (Accessed November 28, 2017).

pleasure in the furry coats of these animals, but also admiration for the individual lives of the animals themselves, how they are able to maintain their dignity while subject to repetitive human demands and desires that both limit and sustain them (for example, consider the giant pig and dog in his 2010 graduation work *In a Pig's Eye*).

Animality plays out very differently in much studio anime. Thomas Lamarre has identified a long-running representational logic in Japanese animation working through what he calls a “biopolitics of species,” mapping human concerns (like racial difference) onto different species of animated animal in order to articulate a human politics disguised or displaced onto the non-human realm of drawn creatures (Lamarre 2010: 85). Here animals simply become shorthand for depicting various classes of humans. Wada turns this logic on its head. Rather than deploying animality as a way to categorize humans, he instead shows his human characters learning from domesticated animals how to gracefully dwell within bounds.

Wada's approach to animals comes out in even sharper contrast when compared with Alexandre Kòjeve's concept of “animalization,” a term Azuma Hiroki famously took up in his early work on the anime otaku. “According to Kòjeve,” Azuma writes, “humans have desire, as opposed to animals, which have only needs. The word *need* indicates a simple craving or thirst that is satisfied through its relationship with a specific object. For example, animals sensing hunger will be completely satisfied by eating food. The circuit between lack and satisfaction is the defining characteristic of need” (Azuma 2009: 86). For Kòjeve, humans who have set aside more complex forms of desire to focus instead on these simpler circuits of satisfaction undergo a process of *animalization*, a tendency Azuma finds among heavy viewers of anime.

[147] A major problem with this approach is that it fails to take animals seriously as sentient beings, effectively equating them with simple machines that can either be hungry or not. Animality here means to be locked unthinkingly inside the circuits of a larger system (and by extension, Azuma positions otaku as likewise de-individualized, mere components of larger industry mechanisms). Wada, in contrast, approaches domestic animals not as mere metaphors nor as needy machines, but as fellow creatures similarly struggling to get by while subject to these larger systems. While Wada's animations often find pleasure in these repetitive circuits of need and satisfaction, they also depict animals as individuals, building out a space of empathy and cooperation between the repetitive mechanisms of both human and non-human animal worlds. The round-the-rock ritual the protagonist of *Day of Nose* joins after his free fall includes a bird and a horned mammal alongside the humans. Wada's first DVD of collected works (2010) goes so far as to ground this empathy through reference to animals actually living in captivity: a bonus slideshow included with the disc features pictures of him posing with different animals at the local zoo.

Mizushiri Yoriko's contemporaneous work shares with Wada a use of thin lines and a focus on trans-species encounters. Alongside furry animals she highlights sensual points of contact and the exchange of weight between human skin, food, and manufactured furnishings. Unlike Wada, Mizushiri leans toward materials more often tagged as explicitly "Japanese," exploring for example the sticky viscosity of soy sauce, the slide of sweaty gelatinous blocks of raw fish, the wrapping and unfolding of Japanese-style clothes and bedding, and the pungent humidity of the hot spring in works like *Futon* (2012), *Snow Hut* (2013), and *Veil* (2014).

Beyond animals, the tactile action potentials of *objects* fascinate these animators. This too appears to tightly reflect the material context surrounding these works' construction. In the making-of videos that often accompany Japanese solo animations released on DVD, we see the animators laboring in tandem with one of two desktops: drawing on a paper or tablet placed upon a hard, horizontal surface, or seated in front of a computer screen, manipulating frames and layers using digital imaging software like Photoshop or After Effects. In both cases, the materiality of the tools and working space are readily perceptible in the textures of the animations themselves. For example, the flat, minimal color fields serving as the background for much of Wada and Mizushiri's works directly reflect the smooth horizontal plane of the desk on which the drawings first appeared.

The software too makes its presence felt. Wada demonstrates in one video how he selects the color palette for his animations by using the eyedropper tool in Photoshop to zoom in on his scanned drawings and select pigments out of the fibers of his Japanese-style drawing paper.<sup>6</sup> In doing so he leverages the software to amplify, rather than obscure, the analogue materials underlying his drawings. The work is created in tandem with these tools by leveraging their creative limitations, rather than obscuring their trace in the name of a more "full" or immersive animated style. The shimmer of every hand-drawn line as it shifts slightly from frame to frame marks not just the hand of the animator but the presence of the animator's tools as well — both hardware and software desktops. In other words, the fleshiness of these drawn bodies become intimately grafted onto, and even dependent on, the materiality of the animation tools, whether

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<sup>6</sup> See "The Making of Wada Atsushi" DVD extra in Wada 2010.

pencil and paper or Adobe.

### **Empathy for the Biological Test Subject**

Animations like Wada's and Mizushiri's explore how bodies are conditioned and coordinated with and through larger disciplinary mechanisms, tools, and material objects, even as their characters find ways to momentarily escape, play, or find pleasure in the movement potentials these [148] things offer. This final section shifts to consider solo animations engaging with embodiment at a more biological level. Here the plane of social control over bodies is less on the level of musculoskeletal manipulation, and more on a molecular level of cellular transformation and rupture (Rose 2007: 4).

This is most obvious in the more abstract wing of independent Japanese animation, such as the work of Mirai Mizue and Hiraoka Masanobu. Mirai eliminates the human element entirely, content to watch the kaleidoscopic transformations of cell matter under his microscope in works like *Jam* (2009). In contrast, Hiraoka, like Mizushiri, blends human and non-human animals, food, and plant matter to the point where it becomes impossible to fully distinguish between them. In Hiraoka animations like *Land* (2013)<sup>7</sup> there is an obsession with the rending, melting, and puncturing of the drawn body: the very capacity of the drawn figure to tear, split apart, involute, and transform. And yet amidst these waves of dissolution and abstraction, the rapidly shifting lines occasionally coalesce into recognizably human and animal forms. A kind of empathy transpires in these brief moments of recognition, glimpses of a persistent subject that rides the waves of this ongoing transformation.

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<sup>7</sup> Hiraoka has posted the work at <https://vimeo.com/74114715> (Accessed November 28, 2017).

Mirai and Hiraoka's animations, along with less abstract works from other solo animators like Ōyama Kei and Hashimoto Shin, often more directly unsettle any assumption of corporeal integrity. They incessantly focus on the porousness, perforation, dismemberment and liquefaction of all physical form, placing the human body on a continuum with various kinds of processed meat and plant matter. The repeated rupture of formal integrity registers the permeability of the body to outside intervention as, simultaneously, a sublime release and nauseating entropy. Each allows viewers only the briefest pause to register the passage from one form to the next, and in that valley between upheavals they trace out fragile threads of intersubjective empathy.

I find these pauses are among the most powerful moments in solo animation work: a vision of individual life sustaining itself despite being pulled this way and that by external forces. The intimacy of these works allows them to recognize where moments of emotional exchange and recognition might lead to other kinds of interspecies and inter-material collaboration, alliances between fragile bodies constantly under the threat of dissolution. By refusing to adhere to clean distinctions between different normative categories of life, and by carving out moments of individuality amidst these invasive and impersonal social forces, solo animators draw out new lines of empathy.

I conclude by turning to one final work illustrating this space of biological rupture and intersubjective intimacy in solo Japanese animation. *Airy Me* (2013) is an animated music video for the eponymous song from *Red Rocket Telepathy*, the debut album of the electronic musician

and vocalist Cuushe (real name Hitotsuyanagi Mayuko).<sup>8</sup> Animator Kuno Yōko e-mailed Hitotsuyanagi to propose creating the video as her graduation project for the graphic design program at Tama Art University. The final work animates approximately 3000 hand-drawn illustrations and extrapolates an entire narrative from the song's lyrics, which ruminate on wanting to melt into the night air, dissolving the self completely into the atmosphere.<sup>9</sup>

Kuno's *Airy Me* is set in a hospital where a doctor is carrying out biological experiments on young human test subjects (Japan Media Arts Festival Archive 2013). The video focuses primarily on the hospital room of one young patient, who in a repeated sequence set to the song's opening verses is visited by a nurse and receives an intravenous injection of an experimental drug (Figure 9.1). The camera perspective sways and tilts from overhead to around the characters and back, visually tracing the path of the air itself as it is blown around by the spinning ceiling fan seen at the start and end of the video. The first time through, the imagery cuts to a backstory showing experimental butterfly subjects as well as test tubes filled with experimental liquids ready to be injected. These are labelled (in English) with affective states and actions like [149] "surprise," "chagrin," and "lie." The poison suffusing the entire hospital environment condenses into an apple, which the nurse feeds to the patient just before she makes her exit.

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<sup>8</sup> The video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJ5QvrGxTnQ> (Accessed November 28, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Cuushe describes her soft vocal style on the album as partly emerging from the need to sing quietly while recording in her urban Japanese apartment late at night (Hadfield 2015). Here too, the material limitations of solo production seep into the aesthetic form of the work itself.



Figure 9.1 The nurse prepares to administer an injection while the patient looks away.

Still from *Airy Me* (Kuno Yōko, 2013).

During the second injection sequence, however, a dramatic trajectory is set in motion by the nurse's post-injection gesture – an affectionate tap on the nose. This nurse's tap triggers a process of rapid mutation and transformation in which the patient becomes a chimera — part plant, part insect — and instinctively begins pursuing the nurse, who flees into an underground bunker bathed in a toxic yellow.<sup>10</sup> Already, however, this transformative escape away from the weight and frailty of the human body is starting to break down as the sequence cross-cuts to a more muted first-person perspective of the child, back in her original position and staring at her own hands and feet, wobbling unsteadily out of bed and towards the door. These two parallel trajectories come to a head as the chimera, now reduced to a flying butterfly head, finally makes

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<sup>10</sup> The metamorphosis animation is strongly reminiscent of the famous uncontrollable mutation scene in the unfinished Olympic Stadium in *AKIRA* (Ōtomo Katsuhiro, 1988), another narrative centered around children subject to molecular experimentation.

contact with the nurse in a surprisingly tender kiss — only to have the nurse’s brains explode out of the back of her head. Back in the sketchier tones of the monochrome sequence, however, the patient finally reaches the nurse for an urgent hug. The animation ends on an ambiguous note with the nurse lying alone on the floor in the center of an empty yellow room. The door to the room closes on its own accord, plunging the animation into darkness.

The theme of biological manipulation here is difficult to miss. A handful of the video’s nearly 600,000 viewers on YouTube, writing in English in the comment section, see in the video a reference to the Japanese Imperial Army’s infamous Unit 731 during World War II. This division tested experimental biological and chemical weapons on live humans in a remote Chinese facility strikingly similar in appearance to the building seen at the start of Kuno’s animation. In a more contemporary context, we could also point to recent experiments aimed at producing real-world chimera by mixing cells from different animals together, so that, for example, human organs can be grown inside pigs for later use in organ transplants (Wu 2017). In our current age of biomedical advances and the complex questions of bioethics they raise (Rose 2007), empathy for the viscerally mutable and manipulated bodies of these experimental subjects is [150] more vital than ever. Solo animation, itself implicated in the intimate manipulation of bodies on the page, is powerfully positioned to explore the emotional and ethical ramifications of biological plasticity.

Importantly, *Airy Me* doesn’t simply present an animated spectacle of biological mutation. Instead, it is the emerging affective bond between patient and nurse that introduces an unexpected feedback loop into the hospital’s experimental routines. The nurse’s somber

expression in every scene gives the first hint that her role in administering both emotional care and experimental drugs to her patient is a conflicted one (and we see a male research scientist looming over her elsewhere in the video). It is this combination of affect and bioengineering that triggers the child's unsteady mutation, but it is also what pulls her back into her body and out of bed, rather than allowing her to dissolve entirely into the toxic yellow of her hallucinatory stupor.

*Airy Me* presents an encounter where two beleaguered humans are able to share something like affection and care *despite* the destabilizing biological experimentation going on around, between, and inside them. Like much of the work I have referenced above, Kuno here implicitly questions how to care for a body alone and reeling from its subjection to larger systems of social control. In trying to find a way out, these animators each turn to a gestural vocabulary of turning and tumbling: bodies twisting towards moments of pleasure, grace, and belonging, at the same time as these movements bring them closer to the edge of collapse.

This chapter has set out a framework for understanding solo Japanese animation as a site of heightened empathy for individual bodies laboring under external pressures. Rather than the gleaming perfection of so many anime character designs, these animators draw on and through their own work as animators to envision forms of physicality more vulnerable, fragile, and finite. The mutability of drawn bodies here operates not as a path to physical transcendence, but as a way to register the physical and emotional strain of lives made subject to powerful external forces. Amidst these pressures the animations open up lines of ethical and affective recognition between human and non-human animals, plants, and other materials. In this way the bodies on

screen also reflect back on the position of the solo animator, trying to find a way to wriggle free, even for a moment, from the larger machinations of contemporary animation production. In these moments, the animator becomes a figure like Kuno's nurse: at once enabling the strange deformations of those under her control, and simultaneously extending gestures of empathy, care, and possibly even love to these same figures.

### **Further Reading**

#### *In English*

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#### *In Japanese*

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