

ARTS

Japan's teamLab transcends borders of art and business

Digital collective blends technology, design and corporate innovation to dazzling effect



TeamLab Borderless combines images generated on computers and individual projectors to create infinite space. (Photo by Ken Kobayashi)

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TOKYO -- In 2014 teamLab, a relatively unknown group of artists, engineers, designers, mathematicians and programmers created an immersive digital installation for Tokyo's National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation that attracted close to half a million visitors during a five-month run, breaking the museum's attendance records.

In the same year Pace Gallery, a New York-based international art powerhouse, signed up to represent teamLab in fine art sales. Both events turned out to be game-changers for the innovative art collective, which is transforming the concept of digital art, and possibly some traditional principles of corporate culture as well.

Since 2014 teamLab has been quietly creating its own revolution in the art and business worlds. In early 2018, teamLab's digital artwork "Ever Blossoming Life -- Gold," was sold by Christie's at auction for \$225,000, about 160% above the estimated price. And on June 21, the group opened teamLab Borderless, the world's first permanent digital art museum, in the Odaiba area of Tokyo.

Within days, the museum, housed in a 10,000-sq.-meter repurposed bowling alley and game center, sold out a daily allotment of 4,000 admissions through July, with limited availability through August, encouraging it to adopt a new target of 10,000 daily admissions.

In 2001, while completing graduate studies in mathematical engineering and information physics at the elite University of Tokyo, Toshiyuki Inoko recruited four of his best friends to start teamLab, which aims to navigate the confluence of art, science, technology, design and the natural world. It has since grown to more than 500 full-time employees from Japan, other parts of Asia and the West.



TeamLab expanded its 2016 temporary installation in partnership with DMM.com to set up teamLab Planets. (Photo by Ken Kobayashi)

Inoko and teamLab have been exhibiting digital artworks since 2005. "There was no money to do anything at first. I was a geek scrounging around for money for projects I wanted to create," Inoko told the Nikkei Asian Review.

Boundaries and the lack of borders are key themes in both teamLab's work and its corporate structure. Although the group at first made little money, its internet reach grew exponentially. Corporations began hiring the group to create websites and smartphone applications, as well as office and store designs.

This grew into an enterprise covering information technology business projects, product development (amusements and interactive retail), architecture (office and retail space) and art (3D design, animation and project mapping).

In keeping with its "no borders" philosophy, teamLab eschews conventional corporate structures, corporate titles and traditional hierarchies. All employees are members of teams comprising engineers, designers and "catalysts" who recruit them and are expected to create intra-team "chemistry" among them, much as a project manager might do.



Toshiyuki Inoko is teamLab's founder and its creative center. (Courtesy of teamLab)

As teamLab became better known in the art and digital worlds, the structure of the group and its commercial and artistic success increasingly fascinated observers. In a 2017 case study, researchers from the Harvard Business School's Japan Research Center called teamLab an "ultra-technologist group." It noted: "As a private company that had been managed by the same founding members for 14 years without borrowing or external capital, teamLab had evolved into a unique company with few corporate practices and organization structures typical of firms in Japan or elsewhere."

The five founding members have the title of "director," but apart from general designated roles, none of the other team members have titles -- almost unheard of in Japan -- and there is no formal promotion.

Some of the group's earlier works feature in the Borderless exhibit in Odaiba, refined and developed as both immersive fine art and interactive experiences that aim to break down the wall between art and observer, the digital world and nature, and humans and technology. Using 520 computers and 470 individual projectors, teamLab has created a free-flowing interactive real-time experience like no other.

As one enters the exhibition, luminous virtual cocoons appear on one's clothing, as if humans have become the artists' canvases. They then hatch into butterflies as the artwork moves to the surrounding space and walls. Place a hand on a butterfly and it dies. Walk toward a digital waterfall and it suddenly cascades around you.



Borderless's installation "Forest of Resonating Lamps - One Stroke" reacts to people's movement. (Photo by Tokuyuki Matsubuchi)

Visitors can follow animals that transform into flowers, and then lie suspended in space in the "Floating Nest" segment, watching virtual birds in space. Or they can visit a Japanese teahouse with virtual flowers blooming in each beverage. Next, perhaps, they might enter the "Athletic Forest," filled with climbing challenges and trampolines. Art and the viewer merge, without borders.

The Harvard group noted that teamLab's artworks are always collectively authored. "There is no single figure responsible for a work, they are all by teamLab," the group said. "They are a collective, although at a scale that is unusual, to say the least. This process also means, of course, that no single person has to develop on their own an expertise in all of the technologies necessary to realize their vision."

Explaining his concept of teamLab's collective artistry, Inoko compared it with contemporary artists such as Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and Japanese luminary Takashi Murakami. "They employ hundreds of people to create their works of art," he told the Japan Times last year. "The difference is that [each] is perceived to be creating the work as an individual, [while teamLab] is seen to be creating it as a group."

Essential to the growth of teamLab was finding a way to position the work as fine art. "One reason teamLab is successful and seen all over the world is Ikkan Sanada," Inoko said, referring to an Asian contemporary art expert who quietly scaled down his eponymous Singapore-based gallery to work with teamLab.

Murakami, master of the domain between high and commercial art, introduced teamLab at his Taipei gallery, Kaikai Kiki, in 2011. Sanada saw the show and recalled: "I'd seen a teamLab exhibit earlier, then met Inoko and realized these people were not working in the tradition of fine art, but creating a brand-new language and a whole new area."



TeamLab credits Ikkan Sanada with positioning the work as fine art. (Photo by Fran Kuzui)

"I knew working with them was what I wanted to do. I had two main goals as teamLab's official art adviser. First was convincing Inoko that this was fine art. The second was getting recognition from museums and collectors and establishing real value to the work."

TeamLab has since placed works in the permanent collections of museums as diverse as San Francisco's Asian Art Museum, Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria, Istanbul's Borusan Contemporary and Singapore's National Museum, as well as with numerous private collectors.

With few borders and lacking a horizon in most pieces, teamLab's work is often considered Japanese in spirit and in some of its themes. Images seem to reference Japanese *ukiyo-e* wood block prints, ancient motifs and anime illustration in their use of subjective space. "We aren't emphasizing Japanese-ness," insisted Inoko. "I'm Japanese, so of course this will have Japanese DNA. But this is something we can't explain by words."



Takashi Kudo feels teamLab work holds hints for the future. (Courtesy of teamLab)

"There are various projects in progress throughout Asia and the West," Inoko said. "The works translate the same whether in China, Singapore, South Korea, London or Silicon Valley."

Just two weeks after opening *Borderless*, teamLab opened teamLab Planets in another purpose-built space, also in Odaiba, overlooking Tokyo Bay. This is an expansion of a 2016 temporary installation in partnership with DMM.com, a Japan-based electronic commerce and cryptocurrency exchange company. CNN, a U.S.-based broadcaster, called the original installation one of the most visually inspiring moments of 2016.

The exhibit reaches beyond the visual to the visceral with what teamLab calls a "massive immersive body space." Much of the exhibit is experienced in one's bare feet, often standing in or wading through water that is alive with virtual projections. While experiencing the "In The Infinite Crystal Universe" installation, participants stand in a forest of mirrors with no external reference point.

Outlining plans for taking Planets global, DMM.com's chief creative officer Takumi Nomoto talked about establishing a first outpost in New York, where the company has leased a 5,100-sq.-meters warehouse. "I watched Western visitors at our exhibit two years ago," he said. "I carefully observed that, quite interestingly, everyone reacts to the work in a similar way, no matter if they are Asian or Western. We believe it is going to work all over the world."

Japanese or Asian? TeamLab's de facto communications director Takashi Kudo echoed Inoko, insisting the distinction is irrelevant. "Our artworks are influenced by Japanese culture. For example, we draw in the traditional Japanese way, with a particular use of perspective and no vanishing point.

"Yes, the drawings are Japanese. But that's not our point. Everyone knows there is a revolution happening and it's digital. The correct answer in the 20th century is not also the correct answer in the 21st century. We're looking for hints for the future in the experience of this art."

Pressed to explain further, Kudo replied with a grin: "It's the same as a good joke. If you can explain it by words, it's already dead."