

Art in America

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MIKA TAJIMA
Ambient Aesthetics

By William S. Smith



Mika Tajima: *Negative Entropy (Toyota Type G, quad)*, 2014, cotton, wood, and acoustic baffling felt, 6½ by 4½ feet. Courtesy 11R, New York.

Developed by mathematicians in 2008, the hedonometer is a data tool that measures collective happiness.¹ Using its algorithm, huge numbers of social media posts can be monitored in real time and assessed on the Affective Norms for English Words (ANEW) scale, the industry standard for quantifying verbal expressions of feeling. As one of the hedonometer's developers explained, the point is to take the "emotional temperature" of a given country. A graph on the project's website, generated from data in the United States, reveals shifts—collective mood swings—that correlate with important events.

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Americans tend to be happiest on major public holidays and saddest when mass shootings occur, or when celebrities die. Nonetheless, throughout the daily grind of employment offshoring, rising economic inequality, and spiraling healthcare costs, the hedonometer reveals the US to be on a fairly even emotional keel overall. Prozac nation keeps its Affective Norm score in the balmy range of 6.0 to 6.1.

A product of contemporary data science, the hedonometer is the realization of an idea originally proposed by nineteenth-century social scientists seeking to quantify and rationalize human experience in the industrial era. Mika Tajima's recent work employs technology similar to that operating in the hedonometer, measuring collective feelings and expressing them as gentle pulses of light. More broadly, her project explores the historical conditions that gave rise to such technologies and the ideologies behind them.

Over the last decade, the New York-based artist has examined how human behavior and emotional experiences have been transformed within the long sweep of capitalist development, from the advent of the automated Jacquard loom in the nineteenth century to the rise of the social media attention economy in the twenty-first. There are many ways to conduct such an inquiry and many names for the object of study: neoliberalism, late capitalism, and so forth. Tajima accesses some of the ineffable effects of these broad developments through the language of visual abstraction, an ambitious undertaking compounded by her critique of cultural production, which she views as inseparable from broader conditions of contemporary labor and leisure.

Tajima represents quantified collective feelings as gallery ambience. Her 2016 exhibition at New York's 11R gallery included light sculptures from her "Meridian" series. The organic forms of these sculptures, which resemble lamps that might be sold at high-end design stores, were achieved by covering a framework made from disassembled ergonomic office chairs (optimized from studies of the spine for worker comfort) with a translucent fabric membrane. The sculptures glow softly in sequences determined by social media data processed through a mood-measuring algorithm similar to that employed by the hedonometer but modified to account for affective norms in other languages. Two of the works at 11R were in sync with the moods of Twitter users in Cairo and London, respectively, with the light intensifying when residents of those cities were happiest. For an upcoming exhibition at Protocinema gallery in Istanbul, Tajima is building sculptures linked in this way to a city near Incheon, South Korea—an entirely new development of high-rise apartments intended to house workers near the country's booming ports. So far, the high-tech city has too few residents to generate an accurate reading.

Tajima often pairs her "Meridian" sculptures with examples from her ongoing "Furniture Art" series, begun in 2011. At a glance, the latter appear to be canvases painted with mists of pigment. However, the compositions seem almost to dissolve when looked at closely and directly. That's because they are nothing more than solidified mist—sprayed acrylic and enamel that has been "thermoformed" into a shell. The furniture paintings are all surface, no support.

These works might resemble Color Field abstractions of the 1950s and '60s, except that Tajima self-consciously accentuates aspects of those paintings that were long perceived by critics and artists alike as embarrassing liabilities. In a harsh rejection of the idea that abstract painting could convey universal truths and emotional profundity, Lucy Lippard famously described Jules Olitski's canvases as "visual Muzak."² Lippard was attacking the apparent mindlessness of post-New York School abstraction, much the same way some contemporary critics disparage "zombie formalism." Still, her reference to Muzak, the service that provides sanitized, piped-in background music for offices and shopping centers, resonates with Tajima's work.

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The title of Tajima's series is a play on Erik Satie's "furniture music," compositions that the avant-garde composer intended to be experienced as ambient sound. This was "music not to be listened to," but instead absorbed the way one might passively regard a piece of furniture or any other fixture in an environment. Satie's radical unobtrusiveness became a touchstone for composers and musicians from John Cage to Brian Eno. Yet, as historian Hervé Vanel argues, furniture music's most influential legacy may be in Muzak's mass-market appeal and measureable effects. An environment tuned properly with the right ambient music, Muzak's researchers promised, could increase productivity in the workplace and heighten enthusiasm for shopping.³

This subtle molding of human behavior through aesthetic conditioning is Tajima's primary concern. If her "Meridian" sculptures represent expressions of feeling—however subdued, abstract, and processed—they also establish what she calls "affective zones" within the gallery. Viewers in these subtly lit areas, where light from furniture sculptures dances off furniture paintings, could be, at least in theory, stimulated by the collective mood of residents on another continent, in London, Cairo, or Incheon. Such externally driven shifts in internal perceptions and feeling are integral to certain influential movements in recent art—think of James Turrell's spectacular light-soaked installations that promise to transform visitors' perceptions and facilitate transcendent experiences. But just as Color Field paintings risk being read as decorative if the viewer isn't properly primed to be awed, such Light and Space art risks being perceived as overblown nightclub décor by insufficiently respectful viewers.

Tajima's mood lighting intensifies this aesthetic imbroglio. The "Meridian" pieces offer an affecting experience, but they have the convenience of an appliance. Instead of a generalized and supposedly universal sublime, Tajima's work is loaded with expressive content linked to particular people in a particular location. The expression is real, even if it is averaged out. Whether users are mourning the death of Prince or announcing euphoria over a recent purchase, their sentiments become a pleasant glow. All affect appears equal, just as most jarring commentary on Twitter is ultimately another data point, a potential profit center for the service's advertisers.

Additional light sculptures by Tajima reflect a supposedly more objective measure of mood: the price of gold. Aggregate interest in the mineral can indicate the global "temperature," but gold's price fluctuations are a more specific measure of confidence in global capitalism and the governments that support it. When the world feels good about the economic system, the price of gold drops as investors place their capital (and their faith) in potentially more profitable financial instruments. When the inevitable crisis arrives (and many of those instruments are revealed to be elaborate illusions), the price of gold shoots back up.

Tajima's first major public sculpture, commissioned by SculptureCenter and on view this summer in a waterfront park in Long Island City, Queens, will be animated by these shifts in value. A rendering of the piece shows vapor billowing out of a low rectangular enclosure made of pink-hued concrete. Lights in the enclosure that pulse in sync with the commodities market will illuminate the cloud. As the mist rises, it will blur the spectacular view of the Manhattan skyline from the park. Behind the fog, of course, are the buildings in which traders and corporate leaders work—the financial players whose moods and confidence levels affect the price of gold, and therefore the look of Tajima's sculpture.

Tajima's piece resembles in some ways a hot tub, a nod to the spa-like amenities offered in the nearby luxury residential towers that dominate Long Island City's formerly industrial waterfront. One imagines wisps of steam rising off therapeutic waters. At the same time, renderings of Tajima's work evoke the Airborne Toxic Event of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and bring to mind the infrared images of the massive methane leak that recently erupted in the Southern California foothills, pumping potent greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. The public

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art piece may generate a pleasurable and surprising environment, but it's also a potential warning system should a financial crisis strike.

Fog, light, flecks of paint: these are the barely-there components of Tajima's recent art. She's spoken of them as metaphors for immaterial labor and what Hannah Arendt has described as the "evaporation of the social order."⁴ Yet if these pieces appear to be melting into air, evoking some matrix of leisure and affective labor, they develop from Tajima's earlier projects that delve into a more tangible side of contemporary work.

Office cubicle architecture is at the heart of some of Tajima's most recognizable projects. She's repurposed elements of Herman Miller's Action Office system, introduced in the 1960s, in objects that are part painting, part sculpture, part performance set. The Action Office, essentially an open-plan scheme, was meant to facilitate communication and collaboration among white-collar workers while offering more opportunities for managers to supervise employees. The innovative designs took into account ergonomics and other physical "human factors." Herman Miller also included various readymade patterns for cubicle decoration. Workers could choose from among these designs to stimulate their minds and spirits. For an exhibition of her Action Office works in 2011, Tajima decorated sculptural arrangements of cubicle walls with her own screen-printed designs—the "gestural abstraction" equivalents of her "Color Field" furniture paintings. She also hired contortionists to perform in the gallery, assuming the unnatural positions suggested by the ergonomic task chairs and other productivity-maximizing furnishings that she arranged in the room. These performers embodied the kind of flexibility that Action Office workers were meant to demonstrate throughout their day.

Tajima traces the origins of such demands, now conventional within the contemporary data economy, to the automation of the weaving industry in the early days of the Industrial Revolution. For a 2012 residency at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia, she produced woven fabrics on an aging Jacquard loom, a machine considered by many historians to be a proto-computer because it can be programmed with digital information on punchcards. The abstract patterns of these brightly colored textiles are based on images derived from sound recordings that Tajima made at several sites of industrial production. Half of the works in this ongoing series, titled "Negative Entropy," visualize recordings she made at loom facilities or other manufacturing plants. The rest represent the ambient sound of cutting-edge data centers, including so-called lights-out facilities that require limited human oversight to operate. The "Negative Entropy" works connect two moments in the history of digital technology, in the process demonstrating the malleability of coded information, which traverses from sound to image to exquisite fabric.

If the Jacquard loom introduced automation to weaving, it also initiated a trajectory in which human work could be marginalized. Much of Tajima's practice follows this trajectory. Once workers can no longer be prodded to be more efficient on assembly lines or contorted in task chairs, the next step is to eliminate them entirely: "lights out" expresses this goal succinctly. It is perhaps no surprise that the loom, upon its debut, became a target of workers intent on resisting the "disruptive" effects of the new technology, which promised to devastate the British midlands. The Luddite revolt against the Jacquard loom led the government to declare "frame breaking"—attacks on machines, especially looms—a capital crime. Ironically, the Jacquard loom facilities that produce Tajima's fabric works are a symbol of a vanishing manufacturing base in the US; the tools once seen as threats to workers now represent one of the last bastions of manufacturing jobs otherwise lost to offshoring.

The strife in this history, however, is hardly apparent in Tajima's lush tapestries. The aesthetic pleasure offered by her work distinguishes it from that of other artists striving to give material form to the "immaterial" data economy. (Sam Lewitt's abject puddles of the magnetic liquid found in hard drives is a point of contrast.) Are Tajima's tapestries, then, compelling symbols of automation, a celebration of the gains and abundance that

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followed? This would be in line with a strain of thought advocated by some left-wing critics who see an “acceleration” toward total automation as the only way to achieve economic equality.⁵ Instead of pining for the tedium of labor on the loom or data server (however well paying it might be) workers in this view should strive to share in the productivity gains associated with those technologies and agitate for a different form of unalienated labor. One symbol of this goal of a “post-work” world might be the intellectual and creative freedom of the artist, the kind of position that Tajima has already secured for herself within the workforce.

On the other hand, there is another school of thought that holds deep suspicion, backed by centuries of data, that automation will not usher in such a utopian future, and that gains in productivity will simply be diverted to the owners of the automated factories.⁶ This is something the Luddites understood well, even if their revolt tends to be regarded as futile today. Tajima's work hardly expresses a Luddite impulse, even if she may regard the automated economy with ambivalence. Still, some of her earliest performance projects, as part of the group New Humans with her partner Howie Chen and other collaborators, manifested a kind of violent energy directed at and with mechanical devices. Performing with New Humans, Tajima sometimes smashed glass panes and operated miked drills, while Chen used sophisticated electronic sound-processing equipment to produce waves of aggressive noise. This tendency came to a head in a performance at the Artissima art fair in Turin in 2008, when the group augmented their set with a sledgehammer attack on an automobile.

Between the accelerationist and the Luddite, there is another critical figure with whom Tajima may ultimately identify: the slacker. At a 2011 conference on the occasion of her exhibition at the University of Texas's Blanton Museum of Art, she spoke about her affinity with Richard Linklater whose 1991 film *Slacker* portrays individuals who have consciously withdrawn from the labor pool. Instead of simply being Gen X burnouts, Linklater's characters have mostly forgone work in the neoliberal economy, not out of laziness per se, but because they seem to desire a life of the mind, however disorganized and rambling it is. “I may not live well,” one character insists, “but at least I don't have to work to do it.”

This may be the mantra of the artist who aspires neither to the perfect work-life balance touted by Silicon Valley corporate recruiters nor to some principled but futile resistance to the coming machine overlords, but to a life where everything from a happy interaction on Twitter to a bullshit day at the office doesn't feel equally controlled, processed, data-mined, and surveilled. Tajima's work reveals such rigid and unforgiving structures—and perhaps offers an alternative to them—through an aesthetic defined by slacking, melting, dissolving, billowing, breaking apart.

Mika Tajima's public sculpture Meridian, in Hunter's Point South Park, Long Island City, New York, through the summer.