

# frieze

Published January 2012

MIKA TAJIMA

Visual Arts Center, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, USA

By Lara Wisniewsk



Mika Tajima "The Architect's Garden," 2011, installation view

In his seminal essay 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863), Charles Baudelaire described his wanderings through the arcades as an act of defiance against the new, meticulously structured public spaces of Paris. Mika Tajima's exhibition 'The Architect's Garden' had a not dissimilar intention, designed to engage with the artist's home city of Austin and with the University of Texas's large campus, where her parents once taught science.

Getting to the bottom of Tajima's constellation of influences – which includes office design, abstraction, public institutions and leisure spaces – it becomes clear that she operates like a *flâneur*. Small explosions of joy punctuated the show – indeed, clearly in love with the visual beauty of geometric design, it was initially difficult to recognize the targets of her critique. On the tallest of the two scaffolds that dominated the gallery were large, brightly coloured letters that led the eye around the structure to spell the word 'Detour' (*Detour*, all works 2011). The director Richard Linklater released his cult film *Slacker* – which was filmed and set in Austin – in 1991, when Tajima was in high school. A movie about doing nothing, *Slacker* follows a series of young hipsters as they meander through the city, as conversations and vignettes overlap. Tajima clued us in to the reference by gently directing viewers around the show using photocopied fliers on sandwich boards, borrowed from Linklater's days in the Austin Film Society, which he founded in 1985.

The sandwich board is a familiar formal motif of Tajima's. It originates in her ongoing fixation with Herman Miller Inc., a company best known for their endlessly interchangeable wall units for the office and the home.

# frieze

Referring to the company's 1967 'Action Office II' advertising campaign, which posited the cubicle as a way to make the workspace less distracting for office workers, Tajima's walls can often be assembled in a variety of ways. For example, her sandwich-board sculptures can potentially be changed into either mountable paintings or walls. But Miller's good intentions inadvertently resulted in the de-humanization of the workspace, in that workers became increasingly isolated from their colleagues. Tajima turns this philosophy inside-out, reappointing the flexible structures as opportunities to question the spaces allotted by formal institutions, whether they be work environments, public spaces or the educational setting that housed the exhibition itself. Two of the sandwich boards, for example, displayed painted geometric shapes inspired by the current University of Texas's campus plan. On the top part of the front of the panel were images of Miller's 'Action Secretary' office campaign from 1972, which advertised an office space that had the 'independent female' in mind. It depicts a young woman wearing a 1970s trouser-suit, her supposedly distraction-free setting intended to liberate her through isolation.

Tajima also presented a collection of slides from the 1960s and '70s, during the time of the 'Action Office II' campaign, which were donated from the archive of the Miller estate. In order to see them, gallery-goers had first to locate the tiny projection, which was tucked within one of the scaffolds. Images from the 'Action Secretary' campaign, as well as photographs of other Miller designs, were interspersed with University of Texas campus plans and archival photos from the 1920s of men – in the middle of a bustling pavement – wearing sandwich boards bearing advertising slogans. Tajima also created some of her own slides, layering the abstracted shapes of the university's campus plan on top of the portraits of the secretary. On the surface, Tajima's show broached the generic, or perhaps used a language so private that it became esoteric, but like an office space or even a city street, it was a setting designed for anonymity.