

LAURA

Published 2012

INTERVIEW:
MIKA TAJIMA

Mika Tajima is an unstoppable force. She constructs a world of the in-between, re-situating and creating from processes, form, architecture, art history and movements. Tajima brings elements and experiences together in her, often, performance-based installations, she creates the raw, and the unexpected. Mika is based in Brooklyn, New York.

Can you hear me?

Yes, I can.

Okay, perfect. So what's new?

I just got back from Philadelphia where I'm finishing up a production on a project that I've been working on for the last two and a half years. But the project's supposed to finish in the next two weeks so we're on the last crunch to get that done.

For the past two and a half years?

Yeah, this is a project at The Fabric Workshop and Museum, which is an atelier and exhibition space based in Philadelphia. I'm doing a project that involves six acoustical woven portraits of old and new technologies in Philadelphia. These objects are really images of their own production—following the passage of industrial production from physical material to immaterial output.

Is that something that you're doing as part of your own practice, or are you collaborating with other people?

It's an individual project but it's in collaboration with the atelier staff there. It's a really unique project set-up where I come in with the initial proposal and work with them to expand on the production possibilities for the project. So, unlike working with a fabricator with given instructions, this is working with other artisans, technicians, and artists who help expand the modes of production. In this case I'm working with a weaving designer,

sound engineers, textile specialists and other artists who can pull in all these specific things down to a final object.

What's your studio like?

Coincidentally my studio is in an old converted knitting factory. And it's, basically, really industrial and my silk screen printing facility is all in there. But part of it also serves as my storage, and as a place to sit and view all the stuff I've done over the years, and recursively assess where to go next with the work.

I feel your work often deals with expectations and roles. In *After the Martini Shot*, you kind of fold art into Hollywood convention and ideas about how things are done and expectation. Similarly, looking at the concept of Herman Miller Action Office and going between abstraction and forms from constructions. Sort of, constructing expectation as an element of creation, do you think that's accurate?

Yeah, I guess the way I would put it is going against type, a lot of times by deconstructing objects, situations, build environment, and the performer. So in the case of *After the Martini Shot* it's an exhibition in the museum that serves as the traditional presentation of art objects. But at the same time the arrangement appears as something in between a film set that's anticipating something, or a potential photo shoot location or prop house/art storage. The show was up for a year, and at a certain point towards the end of the exhibition, I utilized the space for a live photo shoot session (Deep Focus) in collaboration with designer Mary Ping involving sculptural garments, models, and photography crew. The artworks that were in the exhibition served as the backdrop for the images that we were shooting in the space. So, in that case, the exhibition serves as both a repository for past artwork that I've been doing over the past years and then reconfigured in the space to produce new work. The exhibition is both the end point and starting point.

I find it's interesting how—with your work—you're looking at objects and space from behind the scenes, or from different angles. Whether it's, you know, drawing inspiration from the film set where you can, kind of, see the unfinished, "how it's made" element, or with the double-sided painting panels, *Disassociate*, being able to walk around them and engaging in a totally different way.

Yeah, definitely. I was inspired by a few films, one specifically [Jacques] Tati's *Playtime*. In the film, we see the construction of the scene both from an architectural and cinematic structure, and then see the performance

within the scene. Many times it's about facades, flatness, surface, as an announcement of some kind of identity or function within a scene.

In this way, you can look at a painting in relation to a cinema flat, with its flattened surface and support structure. I think there is something there. You can then consider questions like, "where do we go after painting as arrived at an image of itself?" or, "what point are we at with objecthood and the painted surface?"

One way is to reconfigure and repurpose them. And that's why, for instance, when you see double-sided painting panel wall structures in my work, it's something purposefully problematic—problematic is the wrong word—maybe *interrogating* what the dual or multiple identities of a work can be. The double-sided painting panel wall really exemplifies what my practice is trying to get at in one single object. All my projects have that kind of element—some kind of possible identity—but that particular piece really exemplifies that.

I was going to ask, reading about you an, kind of, researching, I find that you seem to think about the surface and objects and architecture and space more intensely than anyone else I've ever seen before. In some ways, too, you seem almost like a film director where—I don't really know how else to describe it—but you're kind of staging and directing and orchestrating these sculptures, while collaborating with others and consistently, kind of, referencing aesthetic and design and architecture of the past. So I was curious, what's your process like?

Yeah, I'm glad you bring that up because I really like to use the metaphor of filmmaking or the tradition of the director in the work. Artist as sceneographer is one thing; however, I am interested in the mode of working as a film director. There are so many layers within the filmmaking process. It becomes a way to reflect on the condition of how we work today—which is about the intangibility of "work" itself—and the immateriality of the working process in making things. So, at the same time that there might be objects and people working within it, when you're shooting a film most of that sort of vanishes into air or rather all that is rendered into a final image, form, or narrative.

I find it's really interesting, just building from that.

I always start with the objects and then think about the scenario that is suitable for a particular project. So, for instance, there was a collaborative film project I did with Charles Atlas in San Francisco at SFMOMA. The venue we were using, designed by architect Mario Botta, has an interior

with a very specific, hyper geometric graphic motif, especially in the lobby. And so I took those architectural elements and flattened them into cinema flat-type structures, and in this way the museum is doubled inside itself. The sculptures became one of the key backgrounds/characters in this project we did, which was to shoot over a three day period of time inside the museum; the film production as performance essentially.

You've collaborated with a lot of different people, like Vito Acconci and Judith Butler as well. What is it about collaborating that you like and how do these collaborations normally get started?

For me, collaboration is the subject and the medium. I'm also interested in it as the source of the tension between the individual and group, to look at how people take up roles in the mode of working together.

I'm not a filmmaker and I'm not really a musician—I mean, I do play some music but I'm not in any way a virtuoso at all, or a composer—and so working with others expands the scope of objects, spaces and projects. So that's how I start to think about collaboration.

For instance, with Charlie [Charles Atlas] I just really wanted to work with him on this film-production-as-performance idea, since his work has been an inspiration for me in that way. He's collaborated for his whole life of making his art work—his videos and films—and sometimes it becomes the subject of his films as well, working with other people. For instance, *Hail the New Puritan* (featuring Michael Clark, The Fall, among others) and *Son of Samson and Delilah* are amazing and beautiful.

Our project together, titled *Today is Not a Dress Rehearsal* was a film production as performance and within that structure we used the speech act as a way to investigate performance and production itself. Additionally, we worked with Judith Butler, which was an important conceptual lynchpin to this project, since her seminal work is on performativity and subject formation through the speech act itself.

With Vito Acconci, I knew him through a lecture series when I was in school, and we just got to talking about many things especially how people negotiate the space around them. We also saw some music shows, which got me thinking about how we make a soundtrack together.

That's really great. I was curious because I was thinking, like, "I didn't know he was reading any of his poetry or, you know, participating in that way."

Yeah, he wasn't and he made that really clear from the start. The last official performance type thing he did was with the Mekons in the '90s. Of course, he still does readings and participates in poetry activities still. And so with Vito, and any other project, it's really about contextualizing things really specifically. You know, again, we go back to the idea of expectation on somebody and subverting it. His transformative career arc reflects this very thing—i.e. poetry and performance into an architecture practice.

The way that I see the *Disassociate* project is not performance at all. We were working on a studio recording, a poetry reading, and a soundtrack for a possible film, nested within the context of a sculptural structure. It was a reading nested in a music presentation nested in a film shoot nested in a sculpture exhibition. The inspiration was Jean Luc Godard's *Sympathy for the Devil (1 + 1)*, which documented the group dynamics in Rolling Stones against the large social politics of the day. In that way *Disassociate* was really an interrogation of the collaboration process itself. And I think that really struck a chord in him.

You were talking a bit about playing music, when and how did you start playing music?

I played music since I was a kid, basically. Like, twelve years of classical piano and then a few years of electric bass guitar. And I played some in casual bands with friends too. When I was in grad school, for my thesis project, I had made this striped wearable sculpture that connected and spanned four performers with guitars. And so I asked a couple of my friends if they would be interested in wearing this sculpture and doing this sound thing, performance. And that's basically how New Humans started.

You guys have put out several records, how do you feel about permanently documenting a performance in that way, on record?

I really like it because they are not pure documents, but new works in serial production stemming from the project as source material. A project can manifest itself in different formats and circulate in different channels—the record being one version of the project that captures a different side of the working process.

It's also akin to the film idea, in that there's all this work and all these different elements and roles thoroughly layered and rendered into something so plastic and flat. This thin piece of vinyl is the material product of time, ideas, information and collective work.

Right. So I saw that New—I don't know, sometimes I can't pronounce words. I saw that New Humans recently did a performance in Stockholm?

Yeah.

What was that project all about?

I was invited by Tensta Konsthall to make a public art piece for the Stockholm Music and Arts Festival. It's primarily a music festival, a pop music festival, and this year was the first year they incorporated contemporary art into the programming. And so the curator of the Tensta Konsthall, Maria Lind, was keen on presenting various modes of artistic practice. The visual piece I presented was a list poem, which was basically a running inventory of global-exotic mundane objects—things like bananas, coffee, tulips, steel, stuff like that. In a way, international bands circulate to international festivals much like these objects appear globally.

The text appeared as an abstracted geometric pattern stretched over fencing barriers that surrounded the festival site, again painting as wall as barrier as boundary.

The New Humans performance involved a “reading” of the poem using speech-to-voice technology, the type of computer generated human voices you hear on customer service calls. We generated ones with different international accents to create a babble of layered samples that eventually disintegrated to sheer noise joined by instruments.

The all alongside the pop main stage that featured Patti Smith, Tinariwen, Buffy Saint-Marie, Marianne Faithfull, Björk, Antony and the Johnsons and others.

I just have a few questions left. I guess we've talked a lot about this, as someone who's working with different mediums and blending them often and in unexpected ways, do you think about the viewer or critic or curator or whoever is visiting the exhibition, and those expectations? How people will interact with your work?

Somehow your question reminded me of the Italian Autonomist slogan, “Margins at the center” or “From margins to center.” Perhaps autonomy is in the periphery, and we configure what's around us.

So where curators, viewers, and performers find themselves in a scene setup is very much part of the work and intention. I also think about

Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, you know? Which is not about being cruel, but, everything is just surrounding you, you're inside of it and apart at the same time....

Is there someone that you find is making particularly interesting work right now, like another artist?

I always think Charlie is doing really fresh and brilliant work, whether it is new installations or reconfigurations of earlier work. He's about to do a solo exhibition at the Tate Turbine Hall and I can't wait to see what he does with the space.

As for music, C. Spencer Yeh continues to be both an amazing soloist but surprising combinationist too.