



ART PRACTICAL

Published August 2, 2012

BAD AT SPORTS:
INTERVIEW WITH MIKA TAJIMA

By Patricia Maloney

Patricia Maloney: Your installation, which is part of the exhibition *Stage Presence* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), actually had a prior life at the museum. Could you speak about that?

Mika Tajima: The piece is called *Today Is Not a Dress Rehearsal*, which was a project that SFMOMA originally commissioned in 2009 through their “Live Art” program. It was part of an initiative to bring in more performance-based or experimental projects to the museum. For this project, I collaborated with the artist and filmmaker Charles Atlas as well as other members of my collaborative group, New Humans. When this project was first proposed, the idea was to do a film production as performance—in essence, really highlighting the production as a performative activity.

The film production became a really important metaphor for me, as the idea of building a project around a structured thematic process of working. Over a period of three days in 2009, we did a film shoot in the Schwab Room, which is adjacent to the lobby. I had made these sculptural pieces, which were essentially abstractions of the very iconic architecture of the museum. They acted as scenery flats and doubled as secondary characters in the film production. They also provided the backdrop and the structure for working with the idea of something being in flux and of the film production as a process of making layers of work with other people. We invited the philosopher and theorist Judith Butler to give an experimental lecture within our film production. She is well known for her work in performativity and investigations of subject formation through the speech act. When we approached her, she was excited

about the notion of layering different people's practices as well as embedding ideas that she's been working with inside this other project.

What you see here in the museum is a culmination of the edited videos with some recurring elements from the actual making process. There are two videos presented, an edited version by Charles Atlas and one version by me. There are multiple perspectives of the same project, projected onto the set-paper backdrop and a sculpture sited within the installation space.

PM: I'm interested to hear your impressions of the transition from that project into this more contained installation.

MT: It's a very important part, to see the work's identity shifting from the active performance-based process to becoming staid and finished. In a sense, objects revert to sculpture, while one can see in the videos how the status of the sculpture changes from object to an architectural structure that houses some other kind of activity. Presenting this version of the project shifts focus from one aspect of the project to other elements.

PM: I'm very curious about the lecture itself as an element in this project because you are looking at an abstracted image—actually a mirrored image—of Butler speaking in one video. We also see the rehearsal of her speaking shot in a more straightforward, documentary way. There are glimpses of an audience and there are these moments within the piece when it actually is a lecture. It transitions between being a lecture by Judith Butler and being another stage element of the project.

MT: That's actually a very important point to bring up. We focused on the idea of the speech act itself and what it means to interrogate the idea of performance using the basic act of talking. Judith Butler was at one of the days of the shoot. Another day, we had the Golden Gate Toastmasters come in and give improvised speeches. On the one hand, we had a professional in Butler, who can really speak in depth theoretically and threads her own work into the performance. Then, on the other hand, the Toastmasters provide this other element; they were like actors given a role to play: the everyday person who is trying to say something with the speech act and projecting one's self through the act of public speaking.

There's a nice juxtaposition of having these two different types of performances. We don't see the element of the Toastmasters in this current iteration at SFMOMA because we decided to present a very focused version of this project, featuring Judith Butler. Besides the Butler video and the Toastmasters video, I have one more video which is really

about the ambiance of the space of the film production itself, with no culmination to the performance. You can see that there are multiple possibilities in this project.

PM: What I think is interesting in this particular iteration, in the context of this exhibition, is that it is not just tackling notions of theatricality and visual art but also how staging functions for a performative gesture rather than for acting. It's not about us as audience members, absorbing an actor's performance; rather, we're actually creating those moments of empathetic response that the performance seeks to generate.

MT: It's almost like what you were saying earlier, about the videos going back and forth between what people would encounter as a polished lecture to suddenly cutting to documentary-style footage or seeing us working with Judith, within the space, setting up the shot. You're seeing how this idea of performance is really built rather than seeing a very polished theater production or a finished Hollywood movie. We're actually seeing all the things that make up this idea of performance as a surface.

PM: Your sculptural work in general has this hybridity between being sculptural elements and background structures, and both of those play off the architecture of the space. Could you talk more about how sculpture functions in your practice?

MT: I primarily think of myself as a sculptor, because I work with issues of space and architecture and how objects and surfaces can shape human activity. In some cases, there is an embedded activity amongst the physical objects, such as the film production in this case. The sculptures are how I first start projects like this one. They're always generated through my visual practice first, and I build the project around the visual skeleton, which then can become the larger project. I think about what activities happen in front, around, and behind the work. In my sculptural practice, I'm very interested in the architectural and the diagrammatic, which gets integrated into the surfaces of the objects, as well as how the configuration of objects form a built environment. I often think of my work as paintings with multiple identities, as wall panels that form the architectural space that houses a performance. It becomes multilayered or piggy-backed work. The identity of the piece is fluctuating all the time from surface to larger structure, and that's something that I'm really interested in throughout much of my practice: always starting at one point and pushing forward or behind or around the piece itself.

PM: There's so much legacy in the concept of surface within the history of sculpture. One that comes most readily to mind is Minimalism, especially

as the last great gesture of Modernism. I'm really interested in how your work in many ways is about upending the impacts of modernist space and design.

MT: That's definitely one of my main starting points, thinking about how it's often thought that a Donald Judd sculpture is nothing but the sculpture, when in fact there's a space that's created by the presence of the work. I'm interested in also how these ideas have seeped into our visual vernacular in understanding these kinds of works, not just in art but in architecture and design as well.

Architecture particularly exemplifies Modernism because we understand the condition by living and working in these spaces. Architecture absorbed a lot of the modernist rhetoric of efficiency, progress, simplicity, the customizable, the standardized, and the expandable; these are things I think about a lot with regards to my sculptural practice. It runs parallel to how I think about minimalist art: What is the legacy of this work, and how have we adapted or dealt with the failed project of Modernism? I start with those points, smashing all of those things into my work, having a love/hate relationship with it all—critiquing it but using it at the same time.

PM: On the one hand, Minimalism introduced the concept of phenomenology into art. It wasn't just about a received meaning but also about creating a spatial relationship where the viewer's presence was required, in a sense, to complete the work. On the other hand, there are all of these constrictions and demands of how one must act in relationship to the work and the ways in which we navigate around it. I see your work delving into those constrictions and those regulations, not only in the visual-arts aspect of it but also in the design aspect of modernist production. Modernist design promoted almost utopian ideals but in fact actually created all of these regulations for one's behavior in response to different power structures.

MT: Yes, exactly. What you're saying is true about the purist approach in Minimalism, which is actually an impossibility. You can go to DIA: Beacon and have that beautiful experience with the work, but you're also hearing kids screaming and running down the halls. There might be dust on the works, or fingerprints. You might see an office that looks like they have a Donald Judd table. There's a slippage that happens with how the work was originally conceived and what we really experience and all the different types of activities that then formed around things that used to be really controlled.

PM: To what extent is your work about mining the failures of design, of spatial prescriptions?

MT: That's a large aspect, for sure. I'm reflecting and critiquing a condition that we're dealing with now. We're living in this post-Fordist condition, a hyper and elided version of work, progress, and capitalism. Cubicles were the starting point for making the work environment and worker more flexible and efficient, but now we also work beyond the cubicle, on our laptops and cell phones at any time of day and anywhere. I use these elements in work to interrogate this legacy.

PM: We're certainly in a post-Fordist condition, where production and exchange is so abstracted. How does our physical environment create more tangible conditions for our activities or around our activities?

MT: Going back to the videos, the project was billed as a "film production as performance" and so there's anticipation: we're ready and excited and want to see some kind of action. We want that theatrical experience of a fast, quick spectacle, but the idea of film production itself is actually this elongated, almost mundane activity that happens over extended periods of time. There's a lot of activity, there's a lot of people working on projects and moving things back and forth, but it's that intangible aspect of work itself. If you watch this production process, it looks like a lot of people moving lights and the sculptures around, discussing what needs to be changed and never getting to the spectacle of the final theatrical moment or the finished, slick Hollywood film. This project is a metaphor for the immaterial work and labor most of us experience now.

PM: As we were standing here in the museum, a visitor came through the gallery and looked very perplexed in regards to your piece. He looked behind the paper scrim, trying to understand: "How am I supposed to approach this piece? How am I supposed to walk around this?" Your work does upend expectations of how we function as an audience. We know how we're supposed to function in a spectacular setting; we know how we're supposed to function in a reverent, transcendent art experience. But, with your work, what are you suggesting about how we might interact with it?

MT: There's so many ways that this project can exist, and a lot of it is to show how some things are foregrounded and some are pushed into the background. There's a constant shifting of where you should actually look. If you're watching one of the videos, you can easily get distracted by the other video or the sculptures. That's the way that I approach even the singular, autonomous works that I make; there's always a view or a reveal

of some other aspect of the work that makes you question which part is the real thing. If I make a painting, is it a painting or a sculpture or a wall panel, or is it more about the thing that happens in front of the painting, or is it really the structure of the thing that's housing the painting or holding the painting, the frame itself? There are all of these elements that are in tension, working against each other. It's like having a multiple personality problem. When I was working with Rudolf [Frieling] on this, we started with just the video. I also wanted to show elements from the initial production of the project, such as the set-paper backdrop or one of the sculptures, but I wanted to foreground the video this time.

PM: How does your involvement with New Humans come into play with your visual practice?

MT: New Humans is a collaborative group that I started with a few other artists and musicians. It's a way for me to do larger-scale projects that involve performance or music. I'll provide a structure or a skeleton of artwork and then bring in different people according to what will work for the performance aspect.

In one of my first gallery shows, I did an installation of painting wall panels. I changed the configuration of the space over the course of six weeks. To demonstrate the various possibilities of activity that could come from the spaces created, New Humans used the space as a recording studio. Again, it's this idea of production and performance, but the production is actually a questioning of performance itself, to understand what production is in that space rather than a theatrical event. I often think about these projects, in which the exhibition might become the starting point for more production; it becomes serial.

PM: In some sense, what really exists in a project is only ever the structure because it seems like there's always a potential for further permutations and iterations of the work. At what point do you define what the body of work actually is, or is it always just that structure?

MT: I'm glad we arrived at this point because this was precisely the problem when I did this in the commercial gallery setting. The questions that arose were: "What is the finished work? What is the actual work?" And I like to think everything is the work. For instance, this project is called *Today is Not a Dress Rehearsal*, but there are sculptural elements, there are various versions of the videos, there was the actual performance itself. In other similar projects, it was the same way: a panel wall, printed posters, the entire installation, recordings, and videos. All of these elements roll into the general, giant rubber-band ball of what the project is. I like

problematizing what the object is or what the project is. It really poses a problem for galleries. [laughs]

I like also to think about this as going to see a gigantic concert production, and a wealthy collector may purchase the custom-made costume or piece of the stage set, but one could also come home with a T-shirt or a CD or souvenir. So there's all these different experiences of the project.

PM: Maybe there are bootleg versions of Mika Tajima installations.

MT: Right? [laughs] I see pictures of my installation on Flickr every once in a while, and I like that. It's more interesting for me to not be too precious about it. Granted, I will make claims like, "This is a painting," or "This is a sculpture," but I do also like problematizing objecthood at the same time.

PM: It also problematizes production. One of the bodies of work that I was really interested in was the work that you did on the concept of the slacker, the conversation that you had with the director Richard Linklater, and how you described the slacker as akin to the ultimate resistor to capitalist means of productivity.

MT: That was the project I did at the Visual Arts Center at the University of Texas in Austin. The archetypal resistant figure against what is normative: I think that's an approach that I've been really thinking about a lot in my work. There is, of course, the negative connotation of the slacker—not working, et cetera—but the other aspect is resistance to identification. That is an interesting position for me as an artist, when people want to name it as something and I'm like, "It's a little bit unnamable. It's just expanding and contracting at will, depending on what the situation calls for."

PM: What is the next situation for you? What projects do you have on the horizon?

MT: I have a commissioned project I'm presenting in Stockholm with the curator Maria Lind, who is based there. I've worked with her previously at Tensta Konstall for an exhibition she organized in January. We started working on this new project, which is part of the Stockholm Music and Arts Festival; I'm doing a series of paintings that is a prose poem or, rather, a list of global commodities that will encircle the island where the festival is held. Essentially, it is made of fencing that is stretched with large, abstracted letters. Viewers may see these at first as colorful flags or patterned graphic motifs, but after spending a little time, they can

decipher the letters and then the words—like *coconuts*, *silicone*, *coffee*, and *cocoa*—to see some kind of hidden advertising for all of these different types of exotic commodities that get traded and become totally ubiquitous globally. The setting of a music festival, where musicians from around the world are flown in to the city to perform at a pop festival, shows how freely capital flows like global commodities, especially in the wealthy seaport setting of Stockholm. Here is a series of paintings where the people are corralled by these capitalist commodities.

PM: Is there always a similar starting point for you, or does the research slowly evolve into a set of actions or projects?

MT: I always start with the objects. It's pretty linear in terms of that aspect. I'm always working on a few threads of ideas within the objects that I'm making. Then, as I'm working on specific exhibitions themselves, I figure out how to bring in specificity to the particular place because the context really changes everything.

When I did the project here at SFMOMA, a large institution, a place that really wants to categorize what a project is, it was important for me to do this film production, which questioned what all these activities, objects, people, and things are. But if it is in a gallery or a commercial setting, that's a completely different context for the work. I would research the idea of the showroom or modernist furniture design for office spaces. Underneath, it's all still a thread of themes and ideas that I'm following and working with, but I integrate specific things based on what the context is.

In the Austin project at the Visual Arts Center, I was already working on these three different painting types, but I wanted to change the presentation or display of these works. When I was in Austin, I was attracted to the idea of using the slacker as the stylistic reference. This meant making a series of works that were stripped down to minimal structural and surface elements. What resulted were variations on the monochrome and the monochrome as painting's version of a slacker or slacker painting. That's an example of trying to push the work into the specificity of the context of the place.

PM: That brings up a seeming conflict that I perceive in your work, and you can tell me if I'm right about this or not. There is this investment in the physical forms, in how the sculptural forms and the surfaces of the paintings actually create that specificity and create that context of the place. But at the same time, that seems to conflict with not just the open-endedness of the projects but also the fact that the life of the project is

situated in its malleability and in all of its different iterations that it might take on. Because essentially, at the end of the exhibition, the objects go into storage, but maybe there is more possibility for the project to continue its life in other ways. The conflict that I perceive is perhaps where the investment might be in the piece.

MT: It's a good point. The work in the Austin show might be a good way to think about this question. That show extracted a lot of the live elements, using the paintings as paintings or sculpture as sculpture, and they're seen that way, in that university gallery context. The activity is withdrawn from that space. And then after that show came down, it went to another show. It became a totally different work in a different type of context. But I don't see it as a conflict. I really see it as the work performing its own purpose in different settings.

Mika Tajima, was born in Los Angeles, and lives and works in Brooklyn. She earned a BA from Bryn Mawr College in 1997, an MFA from Columbia University in 2003, and attended The Fabric Workshop and Museum Apprentice Training Program in 2003. Her work has been included in the exhibitions *The Pedestrians*, South London Gallery, London (2011); *Transaction Abstraite*, New Galerie, Paris (2011); *The Double*, Bass Museum, Miami (2010); *Knight's Move*, Sculpture Center, Long Island City (2010); *Today is Not a Dress Rehearsal*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2009); *The Extras*, X Initiative, New York (2009); *Learn to Communicate Like a Fucking Normal Person*, Art Production Fund, New York (2009); *Deal or No Deal*, Kevin Bruk Gallery, Miami (2008); *2008 Whitney Biennial*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2008); *Mika Tajima: Broken Plaid/Holding Your Breath (taking the long way)*, RISD Museum, Providence (2008); *The Double*, The Kitchen, New York (2008); *Sympathy for the Devil*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2007); *Music Is a Better Noise*, PS.1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City (2006); *Grass Grows Forever in Every Possible Direction*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2005); *Echoplex*, Swiss Institute Contemporary Art, New York (2005); and *Uncertain States of America*, Astrup Fearnley Museum, Oslo, Norway (2005). She is part of the music-based performance group New Humans.