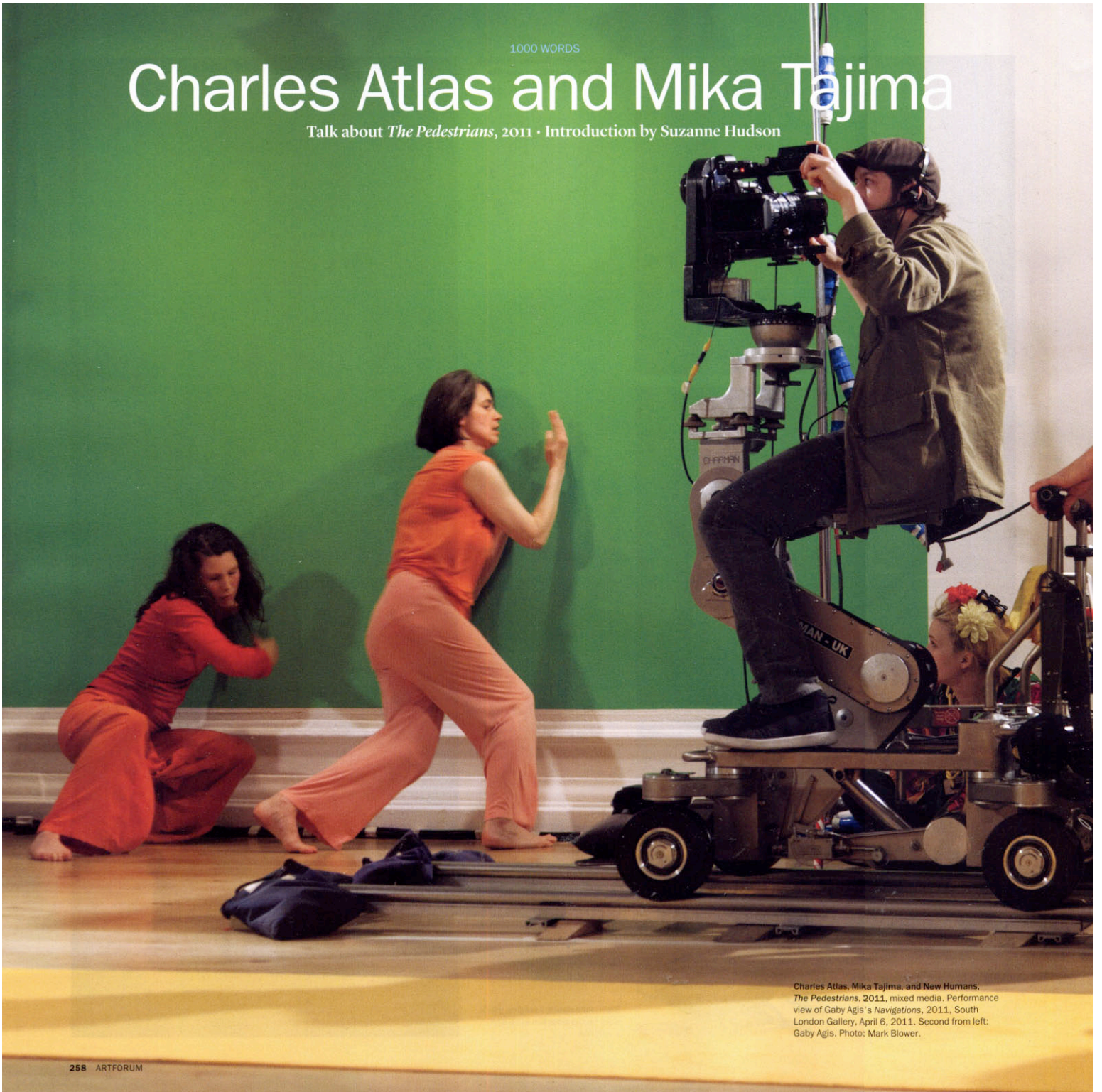


1000 WORDS

Charles Atlas and Mika Tajima

Talk about *The Pedestrians*, 2011 • Introduction by Suzanne Hudson



Charles Atlas, Mika Tajima, and *New Humans*, *The Pedestrians*, 2011, mixed media. Performance view of Gaby Agis's *Navigations*, 2011, South London Gallery, April 6, 2011. Second from left: Gaby Agis. Photo: Mark Blower.



Charles Atlas, Mika Tajima, and New Humans, *The Pedestrians*, 2011, mixed media. Performance view of Sound: *New Humans* with John Smith, South London Gallery, April 2, 2011. Foreground, left: Charles Atlas. Photo: Mark Blower.

THE WAY MIKA TAJIMA AND CHARLES ATLAS DESCRIBE IT, their collaboration was less kismet than strategy, shared sympathies occasioning projects in which the two could work independently, together. With curator and artist Howie Chen, Tajima founded New Humans in 2003 to produce minimal music—among other interventions that suggest a tendency toward the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—alongside her own shifting multimedia practice. Atlas has, since the 1970s, created film and video work in partnership with notable choreographers, dancers, and performers, including Yvonne Rainer, Marina Abramović, and Leigh Bowery.

For their first joint outing, in May 2009, Tajima and Atlas occupied the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for *Today Is Not a Dress Rehearsal*: a shared—if ultimately, inevitably, and appropriately dialogical—investigation of speech. For three days, they transformed a room off the museum’s central atrium into a performance space with a set consisting of objects-cum-scenery flats and the trappings of film production. Like the “site for production” Tajima had created for her solo project *The Extras* at X Initiative in New York earlier that year, *Today* communicated what objects (cameras, lights, painting panels) could be when activated anew. Through a series of assignments, from a lecture on the speech act by Judith Butler to a demonstration by the Golden Gate Toastmasters, a San Francisco-based public-speaking club, the status as well as the temporality of the surrounding accoutrements shifted: in use, used, to be used again. Atlas, meanwhile, filmed all these events, live-editing the footage and screening it in an adjacent theater, as well as back onto the installation itself.

Today anticipated the artists’ investigation of physical action—a shift from speech to movement, and to walking more specifically—in *The Pedestrians*, 2011, a project credited jointly to Tajima, Atlas, and New Humans (now made up of Tajima, Chen, and Eric Tsai), which was on view last month at the South London Gallery. Similar in structure to *Today*, *The Pedestrians* occupied the main gallery, which became a rehearsal venue, a functional film set, and an installation. Through scheduled periods of filming and programming over a ten-day period, the environment abetted performance, music, video, lectures, painting, and sculptural tableaux—all of which were negotiated by viewers, who were guided along a walkway through the space. Indeed, in contrast to the physical separation maintained by the SF MoMA architecture, here people necessarily circumambulated and played a part within the articulated bounds, broadly conceived: The walkway suggested an arcade, exhibition, and stage across which to saunter, stroll, or march. This configuration advanced the premise of Tajima’s recent show at Elizabeth Dee gallery in New York, which saw the juxtaposition of movable work-space cubicle panels, ergonomic kneeling chairs, ambient wall-bound decor, and a performance by two contortionists who strained against the ciphers of efficiency even as they flaunted the results of a punishing routine. Against this background, *The Pedestrians* began quite literally to map the possibilities of a physical, multiauthored agency within a radically reconceived site of exhibition.

—Suzanne Hudson

“The audience, performers, and technicians were producing and being produced simultaneously, depending on where they were located.” —Mika Tajima

MIKA TAJIMA: With my work—especially as part of *New Humans*—the collaborative process has always stemmed from my sculptural practice: starting with the object and figuring out how to host other types of projects within it. When I began thinking about doing a film production and performance, I knew I wanted Charles Atlas to be my collaborator. Our first project became the SF MOMA piece.

CHARLES ATLAS: I’ve had a long history of both doing collaborative things and working in time-based media. In 2003, I started doing live video with performance and as performance. It interested me to make something while a performance was under way, working in one site and maintaining a separate space for the results. We could do this in San Francisco since there was a theater next to the installation. We piped in the live footage, and people could either sit down there and watch what I was doing and what was going on through me, or come and actually see the whole process.

MT: Because we were doing it as a film production, there was a constant sense of nonclimax. It’s a repetitious thing. You know, let’s take it from this angle and let’s change the set, let’s change the lighting. Let’s try it again.

CA: Mika made a location that was very easy to move around, and we took advantage of that. I like that people said it was as if we were doing a big music-video production but without any content. We had all the equipment—we could have actually done a real production of something. And it *was* something—but the intentionality was spread out.

MT: People came to see some major action and instead found the gaffer and the grip and camera 1 and camera 2: the structure and the working, all the components of making the thing. An open set; transparent production.

CA: And I’ve been looking for different ways of interacting. I sometimes call it live cinema, live editing; making all the decisions there, and then having all this material afterward.

MT: The South London Gallery show allowed ten days for filming. That gave us time not only to prepare technical aspects like lighting, and to engage performance collaborators over a longer period, but also to demonstrate various configurations of the space and states of transition.



Charles Atlas, Mika Tajima, and *New Humans*, *The Pedestrians*, 2011, mixed media. Performance view of Gaby Agis's *Navigations*, 2011. South London Gallery, April 6, 2011. Photo: Mark Blower.

CA: The only way for spectators to see it was to walk through it, to traverse the length of the gallery, so the film set became a stage or a tracking-shot vector. Also, the live mixes being projected into the installation space created a visual feedback loop that heightened awareness of what was being produced from within the action in the space. We—like the performers—found ourselves adjusting our movements from glimpses of the footage.

MT: The audience, performers, and technicians were producing and being produced simultaneously, depending on where they were located.

CA: There were so many levels of mediation. As soon as you entered the gallery, you were in the piece, whether you wanted to be or not. But the piece was not really about the relationship between us and the audience or the parameters of theater: The idea of the fourth wall was not much of an issue.

MT: The innumerable position points made wall counting very difficult.

CA: We had a different model, also because the show was organized around the theme of movement.

MT: We started thinking about the politics of walking and its possible social and political forms, like loitering, drifting, and demonstrating. The UK has a long history of trespassing as a way to establish public commons—we wanted to riff on this basic bodily act.

CA: The project happened to coincide with protests surrounding budget cuts and the backlash against financial elites, heightening the political aspect of

walking. We participated in a massive anticuts protest on March 26, which became an important video element in the installation.

MT: Each day took a different course. The social theorist Richard Hornsey came and spoke about how pedestrians shape London’s urban setting, and then Nina Power talked about the student protest movements and the role of women in them. *New Humans* did a noise performance, sheer feedback and rhythmic patterns, with the artist John Smith doing vocals. He read altered excerpts of texts from three of his films, which he interspersed with megaphone-bellowed instructions and unexpected movements. It was interesting to work with him because he has such a strong directorial presence in his own work. But at the same time, the camera lens turned back onto itself, pushing us—me, Charlie, John—back and forth between the roles of director and actor. The dolly track remained in place for the duration. There was an amazing moment when John stepped behind the camera on the track. The progress of the track and the people was often like choreography rendered in tandem—or in opposition.

CA: It’s interesting for the unexpected to be an active element in producing work. The lectures in particular turned out to be fascinating to play with visually. One of the benefits of collaboration is that it forces you to do things you might not do otherwise.

MT: The piece was also about the way that we were working together; there was collaboration but also this idea of mapping each body, each labor.



Charles Atlas, Mika Tajima, and New Humans, *The Pedestrians*, 2011, mixed media. Performance view of *Finale: Parade*, choreographed by Les Child, South London Gallery, April 10, 2011. Photo: Mark Blower.

CA: I'm used to being very independent, and that's really the kind of collaboration that I like: noninterference with what someone else is doing.

MT: And the set—even after the performances—encompassed these ideas of layering our different works without necessarily merging them.

CA: We left it for another ten days, abandoned but with videos projected.

MT: There was this shift back onto itself—from something that was used to something that is looked at. The objects were returned to a sort of objecthood. I made new paintings for the show—canvases painted with a green-screen background and yellow and signal orange and red, with grommets, which were attached to scaffolding towers so that you could see the paint seeping through the back. They look like

Richard Tuttle pieces: weird and hanging and loose.

During the performances, they served as backdrops, projection surfaces, and signs. Afterward, they became paintings again, and so repurposed formalisms. But you still understood that something had happened.

CA: There is now a whole issue about what performance is and what documentation is and what is residual and what the responsibility of the artist is in terms of documenting the work. While others are thinking about questions such as whether it's all right to reperform work from the past, we're stepping right in and doing it a different way.

MT: Charlie has a seminal film, *Hail the New Puritan* [1985–86]. It has a lot of elements that I wanted to translate for the new situation: the director as actor,

viewers as performers, musicians as extras, artworks as props. And there are two people from that film who performed in London, too.

CA: One was Gaby Agis—a dancer who was working with Michael Clark and also teaches the Skinner Releasing Technique—who for the London show created a choreography with seven dancers she brought together for the first time. They navigated and drifted throughout the space as the piece unfolded. The other was Les Child, who was also in Michael's company and is a choreographer for pop videos and fashion shows. He helped us stage a parade. It was really a culmination of various types of walks, with police cadets, models, activists, cheerleaders, a roving choir. They all marched in different formations, and then came together in the end. □