

1-800-Anxiety

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Number 35, Spring 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9932ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

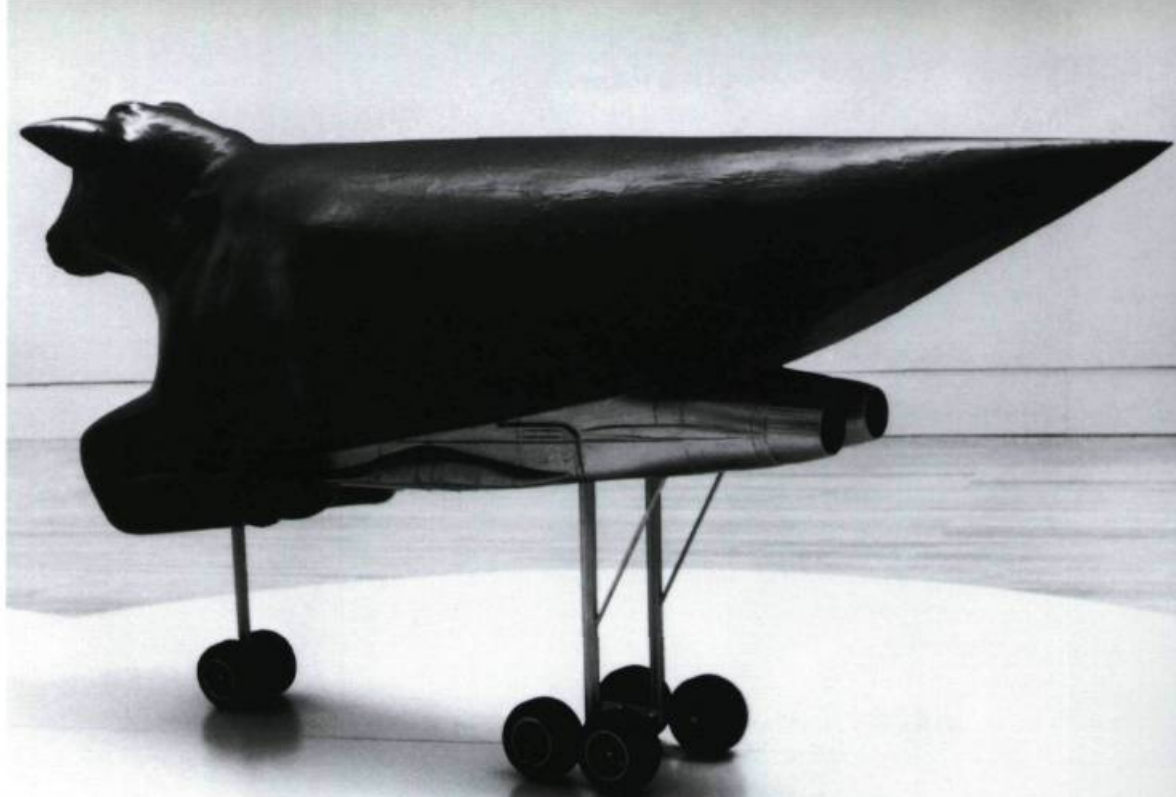
1923-2551 (digital)

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Cite this article

Grande, J. K. (1996). 1-800-Anxiety. *Espace Sculpture*, (35), 36–38.

Taro Chiezo, *The Edge of Chaos*, 1994. Acrylic on SRP and metal. Courtesy of the artist, Shiraishi Contemporary Art, Japan, and Sandra Gering Gallery, New York. The Power Plant, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto.



John K. Grande

1-800-ANXIETY

Japanese artists seem increasingly conscious of their role as international players on the arts scene. While in such shows as in *A Primal Spirit*, the last great show of contemporary Japanese art held at the National Gallery of Canada in the summer of 1991, this was commendable, *The Age of Anxiety* reflects a self-conscious, vacuum sealed approach to art that carefully plans out its message and then presents it as an effect rather than a truth. These bright young Japanese artists, originally from Kyoto and Tokyo, are fatalistic and cynical, not only about the present but also the future. Like bit players in a one act *pièce de théâtre* (certainly not Beckett), their works address social issues of a present and future prescribed by technology, as much as by business and bureaucracy. Japan's relation to its feudal past, from what we see in this show, appears as ambiguous as its future.

In most cases, these artists are *shinjinrui* (new-generation man) who decry the forces that are fragmenting Japan's once homogeneous society through simple escapism or a playful sense of theatricality. But just as Japan's titular place as one of the world's business and political leaders mars these artists' vision, the social hedonism, avoidance and delight their works describe also inevitably play into the hands of global political and economic control. Those same political and business (read arts) interests (The Japan Foundation, A, T & T, Canadian Airlines International, etc.) actually sponsored their show, gesturing with big sponsorship bucks to ensure contemporary Japanese art a prominent place on the world's stage. Do these works truly reflect new polarities between Japan's past and present, the scars, or anxiety Japanese author Kenzaburo Oe referred to when he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994? One wonders if somewhere back in Japan, out of the spotlight and unsponsored, there are artists working towards a more integral vision.

Taro Chiezo's hybrid half-machine, half-animal *The Edge of Chaos* creatures, installed on walls (*Calf-Engine*-1994) and on the floor (*Lamb-Banana NY1*-1994) of The Power Plant, are a kind of die-cast designer nightmare, a benign futurist's recognition of technology's indelible imprint on the natural and human world. A headless deer with a vacuum cleaner and nine

small hybrid breasts fused to it, a metallic blue calf with a fuselage welded onto its rear end: these part synthetic, part organic beasts of the techno-future inhabit a universe with no sense of its origins or future direction. According to Chiezo, dualistic criteria no longer apply. He states: "Matter and phenomena, living things and machines, mind and body, nature and artifice, desires and morals, existence and nothingness—all of these have to be reconciled."¹ These brightly coloured creatures are nevertheless irreverent curiosity pieces or confabulated techno-candies that willfully inhabit this non-space. Chiezo's work decries any sense of responsibility or respect for the ecological systems and forces of natural forces we will always depend upon. Issues such as medical technology's genetic engineering of living species become a one-liner, but one enacted in a void-like endgame universe.

In Noboru Tsubaki's own words, his goal in life is "to live somewhere between bureaucratic systems and kitsch." As an exploration of the shallowness of an increasingly global kitsch culture of distraction and the bureaucratization of many aspects of modern life, Tsubaki's hysterically huge plastic parakeets, collectively titled *Polly Zeus* (1994), tended to debase art to the level of superficial attraction. Perched in the air on the ground floor of The Power Plant, these gigantesque cousins to something you might buy at a

Yoshiko Shimada, *Look At Me, Look At You*, 1995. Multi media installation. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo. The Power Plant, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto.



Dollar Store for your children one day, and throw into the recycling box for future meltdown the next, are aggrandized replicas of the plastic companion birds one puts in birdcages to amuse the live birds. One could see them in bright jelly bean type colours lit up in the unreal glow of sodium vapour lamps at night.

Ideal Copy, *Channel: Exchange*, 1995. Mixed media installation. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Collective, with assistance from Shiseido Co. Ltd, Tokyo. The Power Plant, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto.

Ideal Copy's *Channel: Exchange* (1995) booth, with surveillance camera and attendant security guard, invited visitors to step up and exchange their foreign currency (anything but local Canadian currency) for Ideal Copy's art money coins. An assistant seated behind a desk wearing white gloves weighed the coins in an electronic balance, which then printed

out a receipt with the day's date, rate of exchange and total weight in grams whereupon one finally received the arbitrary equivalent in Ideal copy art money. As visitors went to look at the pile of accumulated foreign money sitting in a display case, they could also see others doing the same thing on a video display nearby. While Ideal Copy questioned the superficiality of a society driven by money, the real medium of exchange was not art but Ideal Copy's vacuous social commentary on the global political economy. So explicit were these issues, and enacted with such a sublime sense of realistic detail, the intended theatricality of this quasi-performance piece sidelined any

potential it had to encourage the public to question these issues. In effect Ideal Copy became an Ideal Copy of what it critiqued.

Yuji Kitagawa's *The Rule of Actions* (1992-94) adopted the cliché that clothes make a man in an attempt to address the breakdown of social order and collective identity in today's Japan. One piece comprised an incongruous, torso-shaped bodice or tailor's dummy made up of Scotch tartan and black plastic/leather with an upside down hat on top. A video nearby presented a slapstick Chaplinesque scenario of two identical looking men wearing identical hats, shirts and ties, in the act of putting on and taking off the same grey and black pant and blazer sets, all irrevocably sewn together and designed by the famed Japanese designer Comme des Garçons, in a never ending purposeless action. As one was in the process of putting the clothing on, the other was taking it off, and vice versa. A performance about the loss of, and confusion about, individual identity in a society increasingly fixated on outward appearance, echoed Japan's ritualistic religious traditions, which also involve repeated actions.

Yukinori Yanagi's *Wandering Position* (1995) installation included a video of the artist crawling about on his knees (he did this for a week) following an ant with a red magic marker recording its sporadic industry as it moved to and fro within a steel frame. Adjacent to the video monitor, one could see the actual site of the action. The markings covered the floor of the gallery like a crazy abstract. The steel frame had been opened up just slightly. *Asia Pacific Ant Farm* (1995) consisted of an immense assemblage of transparent boxes on a wall depicting the flags of many of the world's nations composed of layers of coloured sand. Each of these "flags" was connected to those above, beside and below it by an ingenious network of plastic tubing. Inside, one could see harvester ants industriously moving the material back and forth along the tube/tunnels from one box to the next. Over the duration of the exhibition, as the ants continued to build their nests and passageways, the flags gradually disintegrated and became virtually unidentifiable. Fed on a diet of honey and water located in a tray in the back of the piece, these ants eventually died as no Queen ant was present. Another load of harvester ants were subsequently brought up from Utah. As a comment on the old New World Order and the decline of nationalism, Yanagi's piece was succinct and to the point, but as to whether it was art, one could never really be sure.

Shigeaki Iwai's esoteric *100 Hummings* (1994) installation comprised rows of



rose-coloured cactus plants placed atop speakers on pedestals that literally filled the room. As one walked through the room, one could hear fragments of songs (apparently the songs of immigrants to Japan) being sung from random locations in the gallery. The overall feeling one got from the plants, the electronic gadgetry and the sound element was of an extremely organized, somewhat controlled and stylized sense of life, but a cultivated one nevertheless. The exhibition space became a non-site in which one felt an intruder breaking up the homogeneity of this contemplative, private experience.

Emiko Kasahara's design-oriented beautiful objects included marble nipple/urinals and nipple/sinks. Any seductive or sensual allusions these pieces conjured up was offset by our association with their public function. A pile of bleach powder inside each of these containers made the message even more clear.

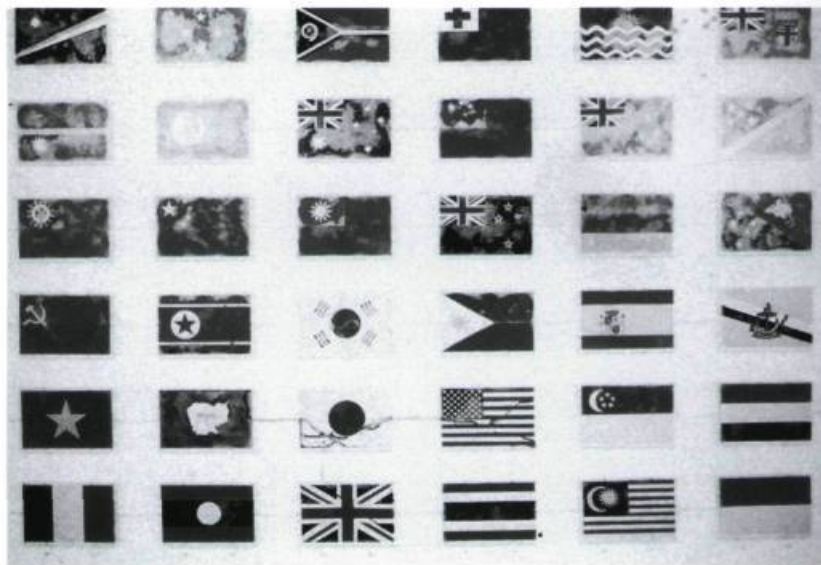
Kasahara's formal puns, such as the nickle-plated brass baby's pacifiers forever linked together in *Untitled—Chain Reaction* (1993) are so precious and stereotyped they undermine his real intention, which is to comment on social control, dehumanization and alienation of the individual's sexual and personal identity in a polyglot, post-industrial society such as Japan. The most interesting of the group was *Untitled—Blondie* (1994), a square, floor placed mat of artificial hair Kasahara brushed for three days to smooth out the artificial so it looked like real human hair. The coldly calculated character of these pieces, their absence of any human cues to balance out the feeling of social alienation and fear was, in a word, remorseless.

The first thing one saw on entering Yoshiko Shimada's installation was a pristine white wedding dress hanging from a red apron facing a slab of mirrored glass. On the opposite side of the glass, there was a *chima-gori* (Korean dress) with a *yukata* (Japanese kimono) above it as well as condoms strewn around on the floor. The latter, worn by Korean women as a symbol of subjugation, had one arm raised upwards. While the wedding dress in *Look at Me, Look at You* (1995) merely reflected itself, the wedding dress was quite apparent seen from the other side through the glass. Shimada's work was a powerful statement about the abuse of Korean comfort women during the 2nd World War—effectively sex slaves exploited by Japanese soldiers against their will. Indeed, even Japanese feminists supported the soldiers' nationalistic efforts, completely ignoring the exploitation of Korean women. The sex taboo in Asian societies was so great that these Korean women, now in their late 60s and early

70s, never married. Now alone, they have been doubly victimized, first by the soldiers, and then by their own feelings of guilt. The issue of comfort women is only now being addressed. As Berlin-based Yoshiko Shimada states, "In history there are victims and there are victors. It's that simple. For example, in Japan, we learn all about Hiroshima and Nagasaki in school. We know all about the deaths and the destruction caused by war, all the lives lost in Tokyo during the air raids. We see ourselves only as victims. What they don't teach us in school is that we were aggressors too."² Two etchings depicting Princess Masako on the day of her marriage to the crown prince of Japan, the "sacred mother" of Japan, for Shimada, represent the ultimate female victim of Japan's patriarchal imperial past.

Teiji Furuhashi's video environment *Lovers* (1994) had a multi-level structure with seven projectors resembling a sculptural tree in the centre of the room that projected images of women and men in the nude. They walked, frolicked, moved towards each other, embraced, went right by or simply stood there. As the moving images went right around the four walls of the room, and occasional vertical, grid-like lines of light appeared and disappeared, one had the fleeting sense of being on another plane that evoked the ephemeral nature of life itself. Words and phrases such as *fear, love is everywhere, or Don't fuck with me, fella, use your imagination* could also be seen. The piece worked as activated memory or descriptive allusion in a way none of the other pieces could.

As Louise Dompierre, Chief Curator at The Power Plant and the organizer of the first ever group show of contemporary Japanese art organized by a Canadian institution, states *The Age of Anxiety* reflects Japanese society at a crucial period in time, a turning point that demands reflection and analysis on the part of its artists, "a sense of excess together with a feeling of anxiety about a society that appears not only to be pushing itself to the limits but also to be redefining itself as needs arise out of social change."³ Unlike the artists in *A Primal Spirit* who identified with the origins and nature of materials, seeing it as a statement for the human spirit's integration of and co-relation with the culture of nature, *The Age of Anxiety's* young Japs are quite specific and involve issues of sexual identity, social mores and a future



propelled by such inimical forces as business, politics and technology, but seem less clear as to how to deal with them. All this ideological eclecticism masks an incredibly self-conscious awareness of the art game. Unfortunately, the game itself is not an art. ■

The Age of Anxiety
The Power Plant, Toronto
Sept. 22 - Nov. 26 1995

L'auteur commente l'exposition des artistes japonais, *The Age of Anxiety*, qui s'est tenue l'été dernier à Toronto. Réalisées en grande partie par de jeunes créateurs, les œuvres sont fortement connotées sur le plan social et orientées autour de la technologie, du monde des affaires et de la bureaucratie. Originaires principalement de Kyoto et de Tokyo, les artistes dévoilent un côté fataliste et cynique et ce, non seulement pour le présent mais pour le futur. Comme le souligne la conservatrice, Louise Dompierre, l'exposition renvoie à une société nippone qui traverse un moment crucial, un point tournant exigeant réflexion et analyse de la part des artistes. On y dénote un sens de l'excès combiné à un sentiment d'anxiété à propos d'une communauté qui, non seulement semble se propulser elle-même vers des limites extrêmes, mais également tente de se redéfinir en regard des besoins issus de cette constante mutation. À l'inverse de l'exposition *A Primal Spirit* (Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, 1991), où les artistes s'identifiaient aux sources et à la nature des matériaux, les artistes japonais ici apparaissent désormais plus inquiets et démunis face à l'avenir, à la sexualité, aux puissances nouvelles engendrées par la technologie et la politique.

NOTES :

1. Alluquère Rosanne Stone, "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?: Boundary Stories about Virtual Culture", in *Cyberspace*, ed. Michael Benedikt, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 20.
2. Kathie Gray, "Race against shogani: an interview with Japanese artist Yoshiko Shimada", *id Magazine*, October 5, 1995, p. 30.
3. Louise Dompierre cited in *The Power Plant press release*, Sept. 1995, np.

Yukinori Yanagi, *Asia Pacific Art Farm*, 1995. 42 plexiglass boxes, ants, coloured sand, plastic tube, plastic pipe. Each box: 25 x 37.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist, The Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Collection of the Marguilles Family, Miami. The power Plant, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto.