

Artist as Activist

7th October – 14th October 2007, Tokyo



Is there a difference between artist and activist, and can they be embodied in the same subject?

The Tokyo performance festival Artist as Activist confronted this dilemma in a week long series of events which investigated art, activism and the spaces which they inhabit. Challenging the routine of everyday life, presenting a re-examination of public space and the creative possibilities which it holds, the events of AA took place in streets, parks, airports, and stations, with the objective to make a form of intervention within these spaces of transition and to penetrate the semi-consciousness of its people.

The structure of the festival was in some ways a reaction to the tyranny of the gallery which the festival organizers identified as imposing a rigid set of rules and assumptions in the encounter of art work and which inevitably engages a very narrow audience. Wanting to have a real relationship with human beings rather than the artificial environment of the gallery, AA determined to create interruptions in open public spaces and provoke a mental reaction in passers-by. Without the framing of the gallery AA set out to explore how creative acts might be encountered.

Relationship with place was intrinsic to the conception of the festival itself. The artists and organizers had to confront a space filled with movement, history, function etc. and with an awareness of this interplay of systems carefully considered the locations for the events and how they might interject the systems in place.

It is often claimed that Japan has a low level of political and social activism, protests being on small scale with little visibility. It may appear that the most active activists in Japan are right-wing nationalists, activism is of course not just a Leftist movement.

However Activism takes many forms, from highly visible activism such as demonstrating on the streets, to letter writing, to decisions in lifestyle, activism is not just loud speakers and placards, as the AA festival proved. Through various methods of alternative activism AA set out to raise awareness of our potential to be activists, to encourage diverging voices and the possibility to change things.

Activists activate something, perhaps it is activating a response, whether one of support or opposition, activating thought, activating reaction, challenging one to think - What is this? How do I position myself to this?

The festival involved pillow fights, water tasting, melting ice, play food among other forms of original activism, aiming at activating something new within the public realm.

The Events

Visiting international artists were Valerian Maly & Klara Schilliger, from Germany/Switzerland, whose entire presence in Japan became a performative investigation and activation.

Arrival Zone: As the artists arrived in the airport, their performance began, holding up signs in the arrival zone, but not waiting for the usual Mr X, signs written mostly in Japanese were held up one after the other by the artists, waiting for money, health, happiness, victims, love, rice, death..... A silent demonstration in which the artists themselves did not understand the message which they presented. Which may be true in the cases of some placard holders. And yet a form of poetry emerged through this.

This ignorance was somehow countered by their final performance in the Departure zone in which the artists read out all the Japanese words they had learnt over the past week as if reading a farewell letter to the country.

Their intermediate performance, Vapour trail, expressed in many ways the journey which the artists were making through their visit to Japan. Valerian, with a 20 kg block of ice upon his back and Klara dragging the same with ropes, staggered repeatedly across the open space between two stations in Shimbashi. The ice continuously melting with their strained steps, leaving a trail of water behind them, soon to evaporate and leave no trace of where they had been, the artists were traversing a new space, yet having little impact on it. In an attempt to leave some imprint of their presence, stones from the Swiss Mountains had been frozen in the blocks, and formed relics of the artists movements as they fell to the ground with the thawing of the ice.

It appeared to comment in some way upon the artists travel to Japan, with awareness of the impact of air travel on the environment and its relation to the melting polar ice caps. But perhaps also suggesting a certain futility of the artists and the challenge of making activism impress upon something.

This performance in fact created the most disturbance, being surrounded by station guards and police, causing small crowds of people to stop and watch what kind of drama maybe unfolding. The encounter with the 'authorities' resulting in the AA team having to scrub the space clean, the slightest trace of this action completely washed away.

A highlight of the AA video evening was the screening of a series of performance works by the German artist Stefanie Trojan, whose actions range from the confrontational to that of the near invisible. For example in Mitfahrgelegenheit (Lift) Trojan waits outside a supermarket and as people come and collect a trolley to do their shopping she jumps into their trolley and asks for a lift. Those who accede are then aided throughout their shopping trip by the artist as she is pushed along in the customer's trolley piling fruits, vegetables, cans and boxes on top of her.

'\$100:8min55sec' presents Trojan on a street corner in New York handing out flyers to passers by. As is often the case people ignore her, push past, refuse her offering. But then people begin to realize she is giving out \$1 bills. These passers-by are then faced with the choice to accept this money or not, some confused, some uncertain, some hungrily asking for more. It takes 8min 55sec for the bills to disappear.

'Die Tasche' is a performance enacted in many stations and airports around the world, touching on fears of terrorism, the suspicious object, with an ironic gesture, Trojan takes a large luggage bag, climbs inside, closes the zip, then begins to move intermittently along the ground, much to the bemusement of passengers and station staff.

Trojan presents us with unexpected situations in which we are asked to question what we would do in such a case, and which prepare us for future experience of the uncanny.

Other videos presented included:

Lynn Lu - Dear - taking part in a faux consumerism protest in Munich, Lu follows the march dragging her weight in salt behind her. Alluding to the burden of possessions and the ancient use of salt as currency the performance was completed when having reached the final station of the march, Lu empties the salt upon the ground, and creates a snow angel amongst the crystal grains, finally unburdened in a symbolic death.

Immo Klink in the video 'Urban Climbing' presents a choreographic ascent of walls and buildings in the city of London. Challenging the city's structures through alternative scaling of surfaces is an increasing form of popular activism against the enforced manner of engagement and navigation of urban space.

Returning to the live performances, Hyper Pillow Fight was the clearest spectacle in a public space, 20 people at Shibuya crossing hurling pillows at each other for an intense and exhausting five minutes. A guerrilla attack in one of the most crowded spaces in Tokyo, clearly making an exhibition of all involved. Possibly the most aggressive activism in the Festival. A fight in which all were indiscriminately targeted by each other.

In contrast, Park Recipe, in Yoyogi park, was a peaceful leisurely collaboration between artist and audience, in which everyone was given a bin bag and asked to collect rubbish, twigs, leaves and other objects to be found on the ground of the park. Looking rather like a 'Keep the Park Clean' team...the group wandered through the park filling their bags with all sorts of materials. These were the ingredients for the park recipe, from these ingredients the team had the task of cooking up a delicious sandwich. Rather like making mud pies, the team assembled branches, newspaper, crisp packets, plastic bags amongst other things into the shape of a sandwich (which looked more like a pizza in the end). Lead

artist Kotaka, Takuro has made this project with kindergarten children, whom, he admits, need no tutoring in these methods as they are geniuses in the art of park recipes, however perhaps this adult team could have done with a little guidance from the young masters.

Ideo Water by Yevgeniy Fiks also took the shape of a subtle intervention, in the form of a water tasting booth set up at Futakotamagawa station. Dispensing mineral water, tap water and water from a local river, this work involved direct engagement with the public, requesting their participation and their judgement, being asked to have an opinion, enfranchised in a vote for the leading water.

Elements of the spectacle were clear in the strategy of AA, but also actions of quiet challenge were also of significance in these tactics. It is not just the overt attention-grabbing events which may shock us or challenge our perceptions. That which subtly diverts from a given environment can also result in heightened awareness of where we are, what is going on around us and how we could potentially participate in this.

Festival Director Niwa, Yoshinori commented on his motivation to initiate these events as a wish to create a 'social accident' in which the public come across something challenging in the course of their everyday life which forces them to question their habitual routines and assumptions. When asked if he wants to position himself as an artist or an activist Niwa responded that this is something he has considered many times and has had to conclude that being an activist perhaps has more impact than being an artist, as perhaps the activist is able to occupy more spaces than the artist. Yes, there may be a distinction between artist and activist.

Niwa Yoshinori is a highly active young artist/activist and organizer. He has performed in various countries worldwide and has been organizing alternative events in Tokyo and San Francisco. www.niwa-staff.org

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