TUBS ABOUT TOWN

Special Feature:
Mika Tajima's Hot Tub Time Machines

In late 2014, Mika Tajima presented the exhibition Total Body Conditioning at Art in General.[1] The show reprised and developed numerous themes—labor, automation, and control of the body—that have surfaced in much of Tajima's work over the past few years, but a formal and conceptual turn was apparent upon entering the space. Mounted on the walls and placed in the center of the gallery were three new hybrid painting-sculpture pieces: hot tub shells (the things that would normally be inserted into home spas to hold hot water and the people sitting in it) reverse spray enameled with warm gradients of color and set on their sides. The hot tub objects on the walls, as well as the hot tub object in the center of the floor as seen from the front, upon entering the space, appeared as negative reliefs, their concave designs receding back from the plane of the viewer (fig. 1). The objects also suggested a negative experience of physical relief, with the expected relaxation offered by a hot tub turned on its head.

The hot tub objects are a clear continuation of Tajima's Furniture Art series (2011-present)[2] which up to this point has consisted of wall-hung, rectangular, thermoformed plexiglass frames back-painted with enamel gradients similar to those on the hot tub objects (fig. 2). (Two such pieces were on view in Total Body Conditioning.) The paintings in the Furniture Art series are named after enticing destinations—St.-Honorine-Des-Pertes, Kuala Lumpur, Osaka, Vieques, Da Nang, Tulum, Los Angeles, Copenhagen, Bar Harbor—but evoke not so much those specific places but more a homogenized otherness, like when a type of scented candle is called "Balinese Breezes" or whatever. Maybe a hot tub implies a similarly abstract idea of leisure as those names do: a vacation world. When I first saw one of the Furniture Art pieces, I thought it was a surface that had been painted and then lacquered to an even shine—a mini-McCracken—but the back painting makes it more banal, something like a DIY home decor project. The Furniture Art paintings blend into the background (literally, as Tajima sometimes leaves parts of the acrylic unpainted and translucent), fulfilling their role as furnishing art (à la Satie's ambient musique d'ameublement).

Giant hot tub objects, whether on the wall or in the middle of a room, do

1 http://www.artingeneral.org/exhibitions/576

2 http://mikatajima.com/furniture-art-series/

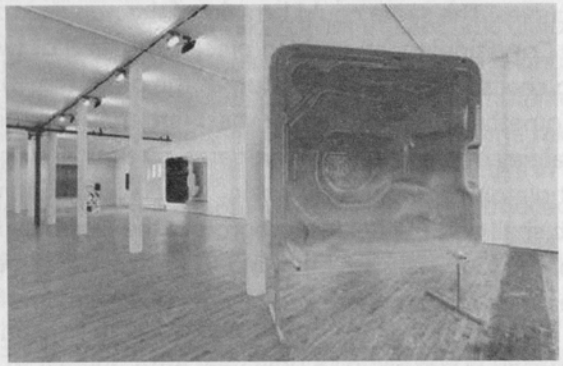

FIG. 1

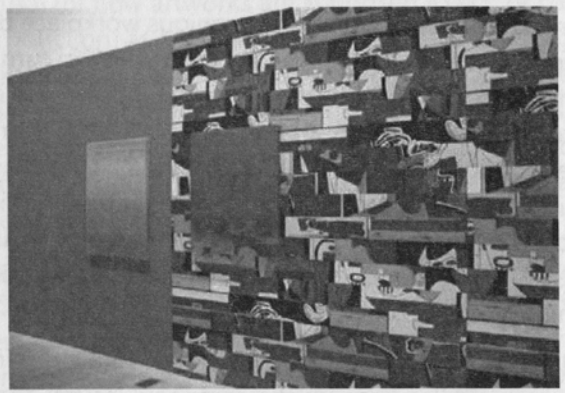

FIG. 2

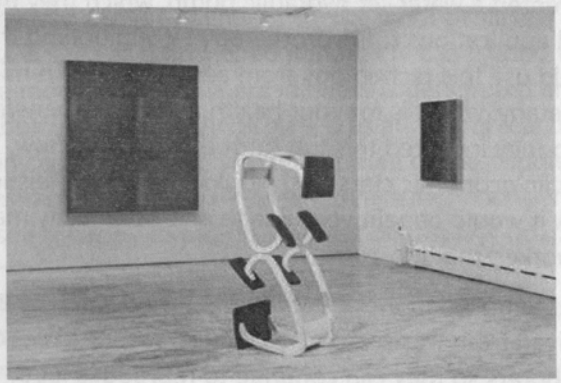

FIG. 3

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not blend into the background. They are bigger than human bodies. They are also suggestive of human bodies, the butts and backs that could be fit into their curves. The same could be said of the non-Jacuzzi sculpture in Total Body Conditioning, an untitled piece consisting of two Balans-style kneeling chairs, one perched on top of the other (fig. 3). The assemblage looks something like an exercise machine, although the supposed beneficial qualities of the chairs are mitigated by their arrangement. Although not platonic examples of "chair," the elaborate, atypical designs of the hot tub shell and the Balans foreground the way they hold or support the human figure. They are intended to fit the human body, to make it sit more healthily or work more steadily or relax more effortlessly.

The term ergonomics (n.) is believed to have come into the English language in the late 1940s via the psychologist K.F.H. Murrell, to describe his study of the efficiency of workers in their work environments. The intended goals of this type of study—harmonious workplace design—have been transferred onto the term ergonomic (a.), which in turn has come to apply to anything designed with users' comfort, health, and efficiency in mind. It makes no difference whether the user is a laborer or a consumer; we now have ergonomic cheese graters for home kitchens as well as ergonomic office chairs for our work offices and our home offices—if there is any distinction between the two. In a recent interview in Artspace,[3] Tajima discusses the sameness of ergonomic design for labor and for leisure and her hot tub objects:

> [They're] the opposite of a cubicle, in a way? Right, but in some ways also very similar, because the company, Jacuzzi, that invented this hot-tub form, started out as an aerospace company. They invented a water-jet hydraulic pump, which they then realized had applications for hydrotherapy—conditioning the body. You could use this technology from aerospace—also military—in hydrotherapy, which is for your health and to the benefit of the body. So they invented this tub form that dictates how, if you're of a certain economic class, you would spend your leisure time, and how it would benefit your health and potentially make you a better worker, too.[4]

The judgment implied in these statements—the Jacuzzi as a pleasure cubicle, derived from war-making machinery, meant to condition the bodies of laborers so they can continue to reproduce labor—is that there

3 which is a website for buying art as well as a platform for criticism

4 http://www.artingeneral.org/production/assets/3751/NC_MTajima_Artspace.pdf

is a bad form of leisure, delivered through an industry of ergonomics and of comfort. The names of the hot tub pieces—*Epimelesthai Sautou (Take Care), 1* (and 2 and 3)—are taken from the Socratic dialogues by way of Foucault, who translates epimelesthai sautou as taking care or pains with oneself, one's body, one's health, and one's holdings (often at the expense of engagement in the political realm)[5]. Tajima takes up this pejorative sense of the phrase "take care"; leisure activities in a bourgeois society are tied up in industries of labor and labor reproduction.

Tajima is not opposed to non-work (or non-waged work, or non-traditional work), as she has demonstrated in multiple events and installations that take up the idea of work slow-downs[6] or stoppages[7] and the figure of the slacker or flaneur. After watching a conversation between Tajima and director Richard Linklater[8] in Austin, Texas, it was clear to me that Tajima views refusal (of how artworks are supposed to act, of participation in capitalist production) as a creative starting point, and as a generative process in itself.[9] For Tajima, the sites of interruption of business-as-usual are all potential sites of production. In her Furniture Art series, and particularly in these new hot tub objects, Tajima has begun to articulate the negative inverse of productive interruption—the state- and capitalism-sanctioned pleasure industry.

In that discussion in Texas, Linklater wanted to talk about Thoreau and Robert Louis Stevenson (of course) and their thoughts about slacking off, but Walter Benjamin might be a more appropriate theorist of this opposition between good and bad non-work. In the convolute of *The Arcades Project* titled "Idleness," Benjamin gives a brief and meandering telling of the importance of idleness through human history—in the ancient world (idleness is idealized but is dependent on the labor of slaves) and feudal world (idleness is seen as a privileged immobility designated for artists), through to the modern world, where idleness is denigrated and reframed as indigence, but simultaneously displayed as an empty reaction against the humiliation caused by wage work: "The man of the middle class has begun to be ashamed of labor. He to whom leisure no longer means anything in itself is happy to put his idleness on display" (m2,3). These

5 Technologies of the self : a seminar with Michel Foucault, page 25

6 http://mikatajima.com/today-is-not-a-dress-rehersal/

7 http://mikatajima.com/furniture-art-series/

8 http://utvac.org/exhibitions/mika-tajima-architects-garden

9 And also that Richard Linklater is a stoner philosopher bro who wears sport sandals at public appearances

doubled meanings of non-work in the bourgeois era are best expressed in note m3,1: "Idleness seeks to avoid any sort of tie to the idler's line of work, and ultimately to the labor process in general. That distinguishes it from leisure." Whether it's called idleness or leisure, Benjamin is expressing the same idea as Tajima: there is a productive form of refusal (producing for Benjamin das Erlebnis, or the "immediate experience," an unalienated "phantasmagoria" [m1a,3]) that is opposed to the non-productive form of non-work, which fits perfectly into the paradigm of working for wages in a capitalist society.[10]

As a stand-in for capitalist leisure activities, hot tubs hark back to an earlier era, of 1980s ski chalets, 1990s music videos, and early 2000s reality shows. Balans chairs strike me as similarly anachronistic; they've been replaced in most up-to-date, ergonomic offices by Aeron chairs or standing/walking desks. The entirety of Total Body Conditioning takes as a reference point a hazily defined "retro" aesthetic: mid-century and 1970s-chic color palettes; early ergonomic design; and, perhaps most importantly, the assembly line and industrial production. Included in the show were four pieces from the Negative Entropy series (2011-present), textile portraits whose design is derived from sound recordings that Tajima made of a Toyota car factory, Toyota-brand mechanized Jacquard looms, and a server colocation center. The sound recordings are translated into images and then interpreted by a textile designer to be woven into Jacquard fabrics.[11] The assembly line, the antiquated Jacquard loom, the efficiency-optimized office or factory, and the cubicle are all signifiers of a not-too-far-past mode of capitalist production. And they all seem quaint in a time of post-industrial and globalized capital, a U.S. workforce dominated by low-paying service industry jobs, corporations as people with free speech, "flextime" or zero-hour contracts engineered for optimal underemployment, litigation over whether temporary Amazon employees are compensable for the half hour it takes them to get through security checks at the end of their day, and overwhelming and growing inequality.

10 Benjamin also wrote somewhat disdainfully about hot tubs. In convolute L, "Dream House, Museum, Spa," he discusses the bourgeois consciousness created by the architecture of spas and sanatoriums. This section directly follows the section of the convolute dedicated to sewers.

11 The choice to produce Jacquard fabric is a pointed one: Jacquard looms were the first programmable loom and employed punch cards far prior to any computer.

Tajima may be using these outdated signifiers of work and leisure simply because they are legible as such: a cubicle reads better and more easily takes on the form of a sculpture than does an open office plan. Or perhaps she is turning the cliched critique of millennials and gen Xers as lazy slackers back on the members of the Baby Boom generation who are most often the source of that critique. The boomers, who may or may not have participated in the social movements of the 60s and 70s, lob criticisms at their unemployed and underemployed children from the comfort of their home spas and their cushy, meaningless office jobs.[12] As the boom generation ages and the health care industry expands (and sees unprecedented, astounding price inflation), this is an important interpretation of Total Body Conditioning.

But perhaps the most compelling reading of Tajima's retro aesthetic is as a warning about our current networked age. The one nod in the exhibit to online work—the Negative Entropy portrait made from a recording of a server colocation center—points to a form of labor made invisible by the abstraction (or alienation) of cloud computing from the physical machinery that enables it.[13] Just as ergonomic workspaces and Jacuzzis distract the worker from the drudgery of wage work with comfort and pleasure, the illusion of infinite resources and instant gratification in online spaces controlled by a few very powerful corporations (and the governments working with them to spy on citizens) delude us into thinking that we exercise choice, freedom, and agency in our networked lives (which are the only lives that we lead now). The mirage of the hot tub as a site of real pleasure and true idleness is mirrored by the (web)sites that falsely position people as the willing consumers of a service. I'm not relaxing in a hot tub (or playing a game on my phone, or going on Facebook); I'm getting my body and mind ready to do more work, and in our online world I'm also doing work, making capital for every platform that I use. Using the visual language of an almost-past era of office culture and the leisure industry lets Tajima look toward the present and the future with a critical eye, from one immersive technology to the next.

-MARTHA

12 To misappropriate a phrase from Todd Gitlin, a generation gone "from j'accuse to Jacuzzi."

13 Server colocation centers provide a particular type of web hosting in which the hardware and software is supplied by the consumer of the service, but the server rack, bandwidth, and some maintenance of the server are furnished in a centralized location by the colocation vendor.