



Mika Tajima

American, born 1975

Today Is Not a Dress Rehearsal (Judith Butler)

2010 (production still)

Single-channel HD video with sound and set paper on stand, 22:31 min.

Dimensions variable

Edited from footage of performance collaboration with Charles Atlas at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009

Performer: Judith Butler

Accessions Committee Fund purchase, 2012

Frank Smigiel on **Today Is Not a Dress Rehearsal (Judith Butler)**

When the Curtain Calls

I've long been interested in a kind of footnote to art history: those moments when theater meets art. Specifically, when visual artists create sets or backdrops or platforms for performing artists. I think of Florine Stettheimer's plastic sets for Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Or Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and their work with Merce Cunningham. Do, or can, props, effects, or costumes produced by artists for the stage become artworks? What makes something the backdrop versus the main event? And what happens when artists don't care about this divide—or when they work that divide to new ends?

Mika Tajima doesn't care. She's interested in reversibility, and her work always imagines objects that turn into their opposites. Sculptures become stages, paintings become backdrops, performance becomes video. In 2009, Tajima, with her sound collective New Humans and the video artist (and dance documentarian, especially of Cunningham) Charles Atlas, created a three-day film shoot at SFMOMA. The public could witness a live film production in the Mario Botta-designed atrium, complete with gaffers, cameras, a dolly track, props, and roadies moving stuff around. Or they could visit the Phyllis Wattis Theater and watch Atlas's live edit and mixing of the proceedings. Do you want 3-D real time, standing, or its realization as a 2-D spectacle, sitting in front of a screen? While helping to put this thing together, I guessed everyone would choose the flat realization in-theater

(it did look great). Being a student of radical theater, I thrilled to the number of people who flocked to the live set, where hearing and sight-lines to the action were compromised at best.

That performance, *Today Is Not a Dress Rehearsal*, moved via three acts: On Day 1, a Toastmasters group demonstrated public speaking skills devoid of "ums" or "ahs" or any like interruption. Day 2, philosopher Judith Butler lectured on Freud and love. Day 3, Tajima and New Humans, in a noise piece, blew the power, unintended. (The threat of interruption, realized, at last!) Those three days have since become an installation with video that is now in our collection. It incorporates footage from the original production, in edits by both Tajima and Atlas, as well as the movable sets and backdrops from the film shoot. The latter reference SFMOMA's building, but its hard geometries lose their muscularity when transformed into slim, mobile flats. Judith Butler, alone and with our crew, now animates the secondhand architecture.

Though its solo star holds the screen, *Today Is Not a Dress Rehearsal (Judith Butler)* is devoid of the danger of presence: nothing blows up and you're not forced to choose between live production or onscreen edit. Tajima doesn't care. Collaboration, with Atlas, with Butler, with the crew, is as embedded in the installation as it was in the first performance. But the set now swallows the performance, creating a flat portal to another space, another time. Sometimes the backdrop wins.

Frank Smigiel is associate curator of performance and film at SFMOMA.