

Mika Tajima's art practice interrogates the physical and immaterial structures that enact influence upon the psyche and profoundly shape human behaviors. In attempting to characterize personal agency and locate the constructs of coercion in our environment, Tajima's work continually poses the question: Do we act with self-determination or do external forces drive our behavior?

By examining the modern American office, *A Facility Based on Change* (2010–11) critiques the ways in which the office cubicle enacts control over and molds the behaviors of the workers that inhabit it. Introduced in 1967 by modernist design firm Herman Miller, the Action Office II system marketed cubicle design as a model for productivity and efficiency in the workplace. The bright colors and cheerful patterns printed on the fabric-lined walls of the office system bely the tyranny of the cubicle, which delineates and dissects space, constricting and isolating its occupants. By assembling Action Office II partition walls in non-functional configurations and inviting live contortionists to recontextualize space and the human body in it, Tajima's installation deconstructs the architectures of agency in the office.

The human body also features prominently in *Pranayama* (2017–20), a series of aesthetically alluring wood sculptures that loosely take the form of protective armatures and orthopedic prosthetics. Impossible to wear, the braces are punctuated with chrome Jacuzzi jets (air valves), contrasting external body modifications and restraints with internal spiritual pathways like the Ayurvedic practice of pranayama breath control.

Tajima's later work moves beyond the corporeal and into the cerebral. *Human Synth* leverages technology to explore the ways in which humans are in constant negotiation with their environments—in

particular, with the pervasive presence of social media. *Human Synth (Hawaii)*, 2022, commissioned for HT22, as with previous iterations—*Human Synth (Los Angeles)*, 2019, and *Human Synth (Okayama)*, 2019—compiles seemingly insignificant and ephemeral instances of self-expression on social media and computes them into quantifiable data. Tajima explains that the work 'contemplates an existence thoroughly shaped by technology and the soft power that regulates us as subjects from within our psyche.'

Human Synth uses a custom sentiment analysis program designed by a computational linguistics academic. The program is a form of extractive technology that mines data from social media in a specific geographic area, selecting keywords indicative of human sentiment and processing language to project a future collective mood. In essence, the Hawai'i version is a living portrait of the place, and yet, its speculative aspect questions if human energy can be fully captured through techno-capitalism.

The real-time results appear on a large screen in the form of digital smoke that billows, morphs, and is in constant flux. The colors, formations, and speed of the smoke correspond to data inputs in the algorithm. This digital smoke is a contemporary reference to the ancient Mesopotamian practice of capnomancy, in which the shape, movement, and direction of ceremonial incense smoke was divined to predict futures and auger fortunes. In this way, *Human Synth* places the viewer in the role of divinator, a position of agency, tasked with interpreting the data-driven smoke. The act of predicting the future—itself a gesture of self-determination, freedom, or a self-fulfilling prophecy—directly impacts and gives shape to the present. ND



Installation views: **Mika Tajima**, *Human Synth* (Los Angeles), 2019, custom predictive sentiment analysis program, gaming engine, Alienware VR PC, Twitter, API, video, color, endless duration, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles. © Mika Tajima. Photo: Flying Studio.