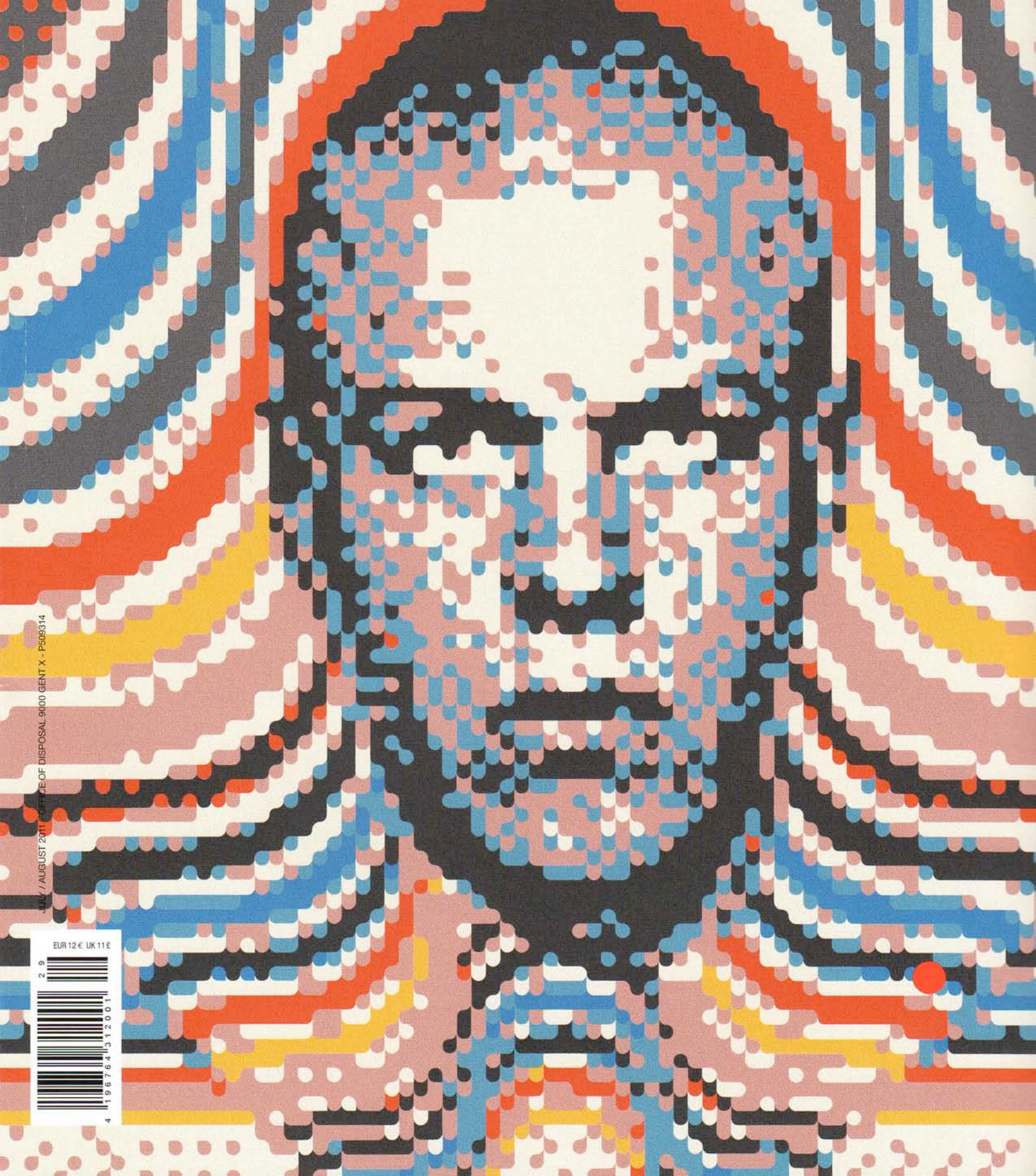


# DAMN

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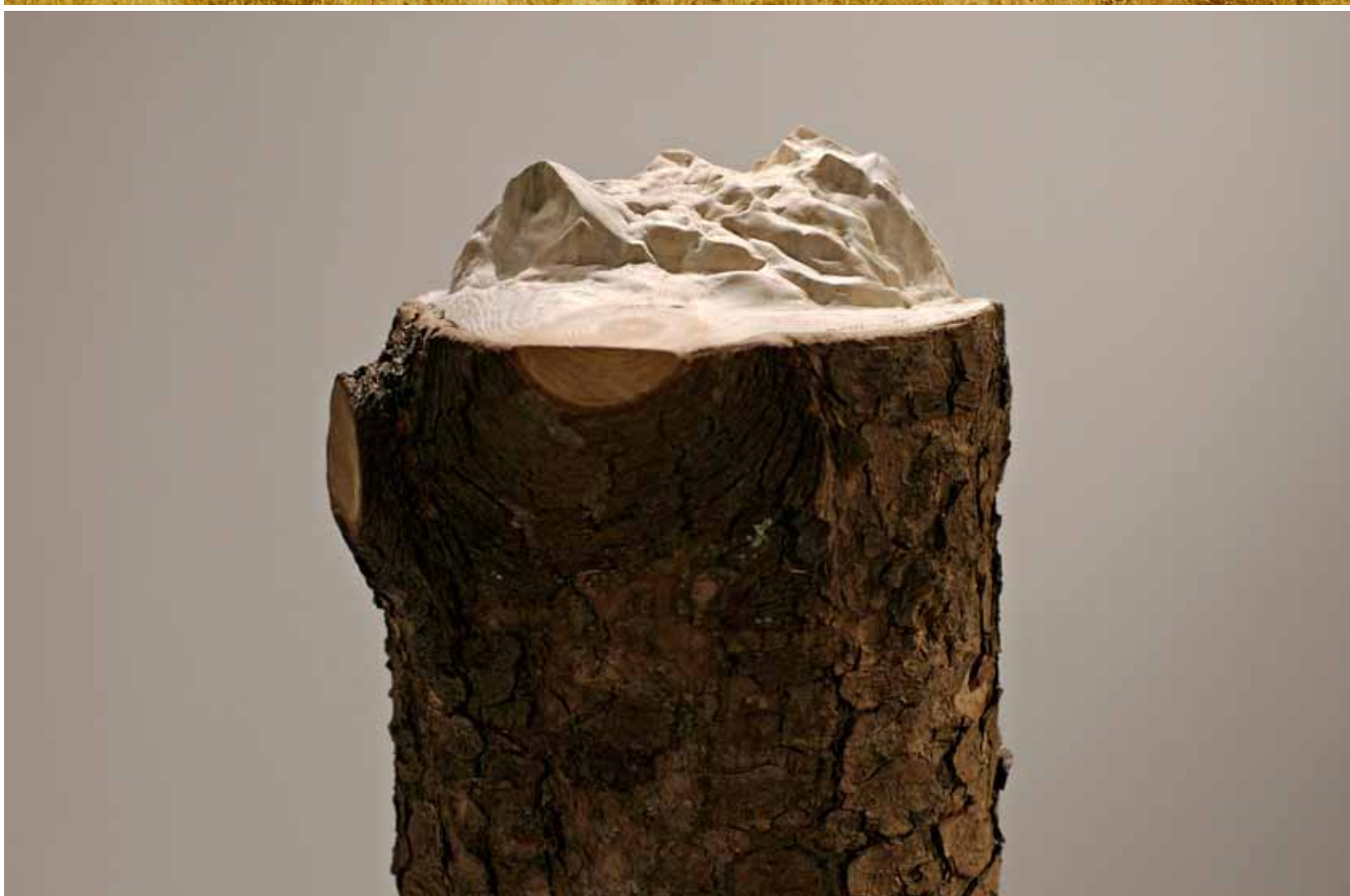
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# ‘Ordinary People’

## *The Art of Simple Living*

Living simply is not for the lazy, as to do it well is every bit as energy expending and time consuming as the sinister option of selling one's time for money. The difference is found in the joy from which the former method derives and the satisfaction that it ultimately brings. This artist duo has managed to tap into the essence of their beings and produce works of art that are at once labour intensive and ephemeral, based entirely on the concept of ordinariness, albeit at a higher magnitude than the sort which tends to be lived in everyday life.



text SILVIA ANNA BARRILÀ  
images MAI YAMASHITA & NAOTO KOBAYASHI

“Time is money!” Since Benjamin Franklin pronounced that sentence in the 18th century, this has been one of the leading principles of Western society. Japanese artist duo Mai Yamashita & Naoto Kobayashi decided to refuse this dictate. “Having seen our parents work so hard,” Yamashita and Kobayashi said, “we always had doubts at the back of our minds as to whether we were living to work or working to live.”

Yamashita and Kobayashi's explorations stem from the assumption that for human beings, time is life itself, and that everybody can choose how to spend this time, but that in a capitalist world people sell their time and convert it into money. “Starting there,” they say, “we made a conscious decision to deliberately dedicate our time to something small and ordinary. By doing so, we thought that perhaps we could give value even to small, normally meaningless things.”

From that moment on, Yamashita and Kobayashi started realising long-term performances recorded on video in which they take a long time and invest huge amounts of work into carrying out actions that are apparently minimal and ephemeral. In ‘Waiting for sprouting’

(2002), for instance, the duo devoted their attention to observing the sprouting of a seed for nine days. Having held the sprouting seed in their hands for the entire duration of the process, the action reached an intense emotional pitch. In ‘Present (for a giraffe)’ (2004), they took time to knit a sweater for a four-metre tall giraffe. Another six months of their lives were spent licking a giant candy the size of a football. They kept licking the candy day after day until they reduced it to the size of an ordinary candy. For the work ‘1000 Waves’ (2007), they travelled to the Baltic Sea in order to count and number 1000 waves.

### **Nurture versus nature**

Nature is often the protagonist in their work: “Take animals, or a stone, or a tree, or the ocean,” they explain, “these exist in a world in which the ordinary is entirely different from ours. They are a third party to our world. Naturally, they exist completely independently from such things as depression, war, or the information society. When we start comparing our world to theirs, it allows us to easily breakaway from the norm or common sense. It makes us appreciate the commonsense reality that there is no such thing as normal or common sense.”

Essentially, knitting is a warm-hearted activity with the aim of transmitting love to family members or lovers. The artists completed the knitting of a super, life-sized sweater for a 4 metre tall giraffe in a zoo, miniature model (scale 1:30)

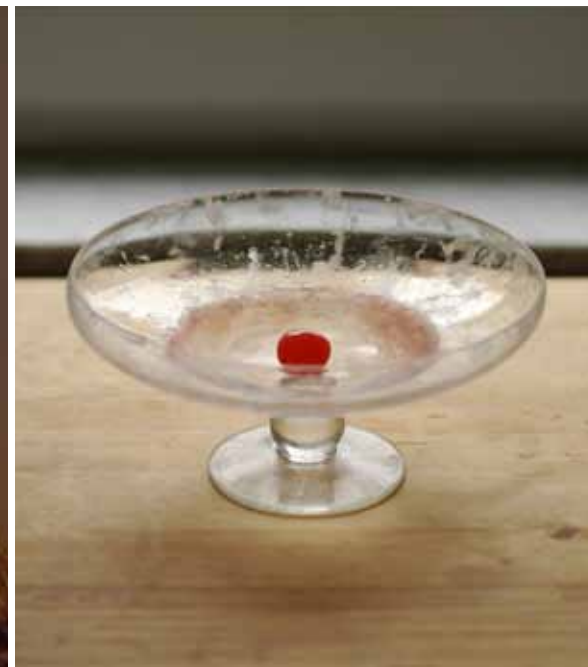
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Yamashita and Kobayashi stick to the simple, basic principle of creating artwork, that is: “Look and Make”. They went to the Swiss Alps, gathered pieces of firewood from around their house, and created a mountain sculpture in front of the mountain

On a snowy day at the Treptower park in Berlin, 23 radio-controlled toy cars dressed in fake fur, pulled Yamashita on a sled with wheels, like a dogsled, until the batteries ran out (right)

The project began on the day that Yamashita and Kobayashi created a giant candy the size of a football (18cm in diameter). From that day onwards they licked the candy day after day for about six months, with the aim of creating an ordinary candy, the kind you can buy at the shop. The video work, shot with the artists in profile, records this process. While they were licking, the landscape in the background changed from snowy winter to summer (below, both images)

Rubbing a Camel, 2010, video installation: bronze, HD video, 57 x 18 x 24 cm, 6'56" (bottom, left)

This project was made on the shoreline in Germany, fronting the Baltic Sea. In the work, Yamashita and Kobayashi counted and numbered the waves in writing, until they reached 1000 (bottom, right)



This attitude towards nature is evident in the work 'Release of mineral water' (2004). In this case, Yamashita and Kobayashi travelled from Japan to Germany to bring two bottles of German water bought in a shop in Japan back to its original source. Through this action they 'rescued' the bottles, and criticised the absurdity of the current global trade.

After this first journey to Germany, Yamashita and Kobayashi lived many years in Berlin. Here they kept on dedicating themselves to apparently meaningless tasks, like rubbing a bronze sculpture representing a camel ('Rubbing a camel', 2010). Referring to the popular belief that touching a sculpture or object in a special location will bring good fortune, the two artists rubbed the camel's humps everyday for five months to make it brilliantly golden.

Also in Berlin, Yamashita and Kobayashi took part in the exhibition 'Re-imagining Asia' at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, with the work 'Infinity' (2008). They started from the motto 'Paths are made by walking' and, in order to determine whether the phrase was actually true, they kept running in the garden in front of the Berlin institution for five days straight. The path they created had the shape of the infinity symbol.

#### Eliminating the object

At the beginning of May, Yamashita and Kobayashi moved to New York to participate in the artist-in-residence program at ISCP. "Having come to New York, the new environment may give us new inspiration. Our activities so far have been largely focused on producing an object out of something, but that was due to the effect of materialism within ourselves. (...) Recently,

'Paths are made by walking'  
In order to determine whether the above phrase was actually true, Yamashita and Kobayashi kept running in a park for 5 days. In the time-lapse movie compiled from digital photographs, a path the shape of ∞ (infinity) gradually emerged as they moved at high-speed (above)

Crane and Acorn, 2008,  
10 C-prints, 40 x 50 cm  
(bottom)





After 17 years of living and working together, Yamashita and Kobayashi attempted to have a dialogue without words. They had a thousand telepathic exchanges with one another. And they edited a video by collecting 10 miraculous (or accidental) scenes among countless failures, and showed the video with the drawings (above, all images)

'Release of mineral water' is a documentary in which the artists and mineral water made a journey Yamashita and Kobayashi 'rescue' two bottles of Tönissteiner mineral water from a convenience store in Japan and carry the water to its source, the Eifel region of Germany, in order to 'release' it (right)

Forest Dishes, 2010: ceramic, DVD (slide show) diameter 17- 26 cm, 3'30" (far right)



we are thinking of focusing on things like spirit or conscience as well, i.e. on aspects that are 'soft' rather than 'hard' facts." This kind of approach is already suggested in the work 'Telepathy' (2009). After 17 years of living and working together, Yamashita and Kobayashi have tried to have a dialogue without words. They sent/received info telepathically, in turns, a thousand times, but achieved only 10 miraculous (or accidental) successes.

a little bit different within our ordinary lives. It is almost like a daily chore. In a way, it may be similar to the Buddhist training. We are not particularly religious, but we feel the way our activities develop side-by-side with our lives is just about right." #

"We are ordinary people," they conclude, "and therefore we feel that it suits us most to try to do something

[www.yamashita-kobayashi.com](http://www.yamashita-kobayashi.com)