

## Profile



adrian

## Mai Yamashita + Naoto Kobayashi



Like so many before them, video artists Mai Yamashita and Naoto Kobayashi are walking the long “weg” to Germany for funds to make a living. In their case, the path has taken the shape of an infinity sign, trodden out step by step out on the grass in Berlin’s Tiergarten. The couple, dressed as day trip hikers, are jogging round and round and round as the grass goes yellow. The exhausting work is filmed in a hilarious speeded up silent film that at once mocks the pompousness of Richard Long style “land art”, as well as treading a new line towards an art of the absurd. Keep walking, keep smiling, even as life gets tough for young artists today.

Here is the video on You Tube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8KdQ4aV4eB4>

The work, *Infinity* (2006), is a typical piece of dry irony from this cheerful art unit, who have developed an impressive body of short and witty video works that can be viewed on their excellent and fun interactive website.

<http://www.yamashita-kobayashi.com/>

The young lions filmed ripping apart canvasses (*Lion & Canvas*, images below) I first saw at Yamashita’s PhD graduation show at GEIDAI in 2008. It suggests a whole line of animal art putting artist materials to better use. Other works include: licking a giant candy ball for six months until it disappears; erasing all the negative words from newspapers; and “rescuing” mineral water by pouring it back into nature. Yamashita had also filed a dissertation on humour in art. It was the outstanding portfolio of the graduation show that year.



Two aspects of their work interest me in particular. One is the dynamic of an “Art Unit” – in this case, also a couple – a practice of doing art that is becoming increasingly significant in Japan. Above all, to practice art as a unit stresses a seriousness of purpose combined and a rejection of the artist’s ego. The unit idea hints at anonymity in even the most compact of small groups. Secondly, they are artists clearly in the line of “gentle intervention”, a modest but distinctive trend in Japanese video art identified by Midori Matsui with artists such as Shimabuku, Saki Satom, and Taro Izumi. The absurdist irony and the maturity of their themes distances them from the humourless teenage angst art that Matsui often favours, but there is a sly political edge to their work that might fit within a “Micropop” frame.



I met the couple at a small house party with Hitomi Hasegawa, a highly active curator who runs the Moving Image Archive of Contemporary Art in Yokohama. It was a delightful evening over home cooked food and drink viewing videos with a group of high spirited friends. In the mainstream global art world, we are more used to video art that plays continually with provocation and baroque excess – the kind of violence, pornography, or shock tactics associated with American enfants terribles like Paul McCarthy or Matthew Barney. So it is refreshing to find uses of video that stress, in such a subtle, understated work, the virtues of humour, observation, and polite wit.

Yamashita and Kobayashi are presenting new works in Leipzig, Germany, as part of their current residency.

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