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Associative Property

KYLE BENTLEY ON PUBLIC-HOLIDAY PROJECTS

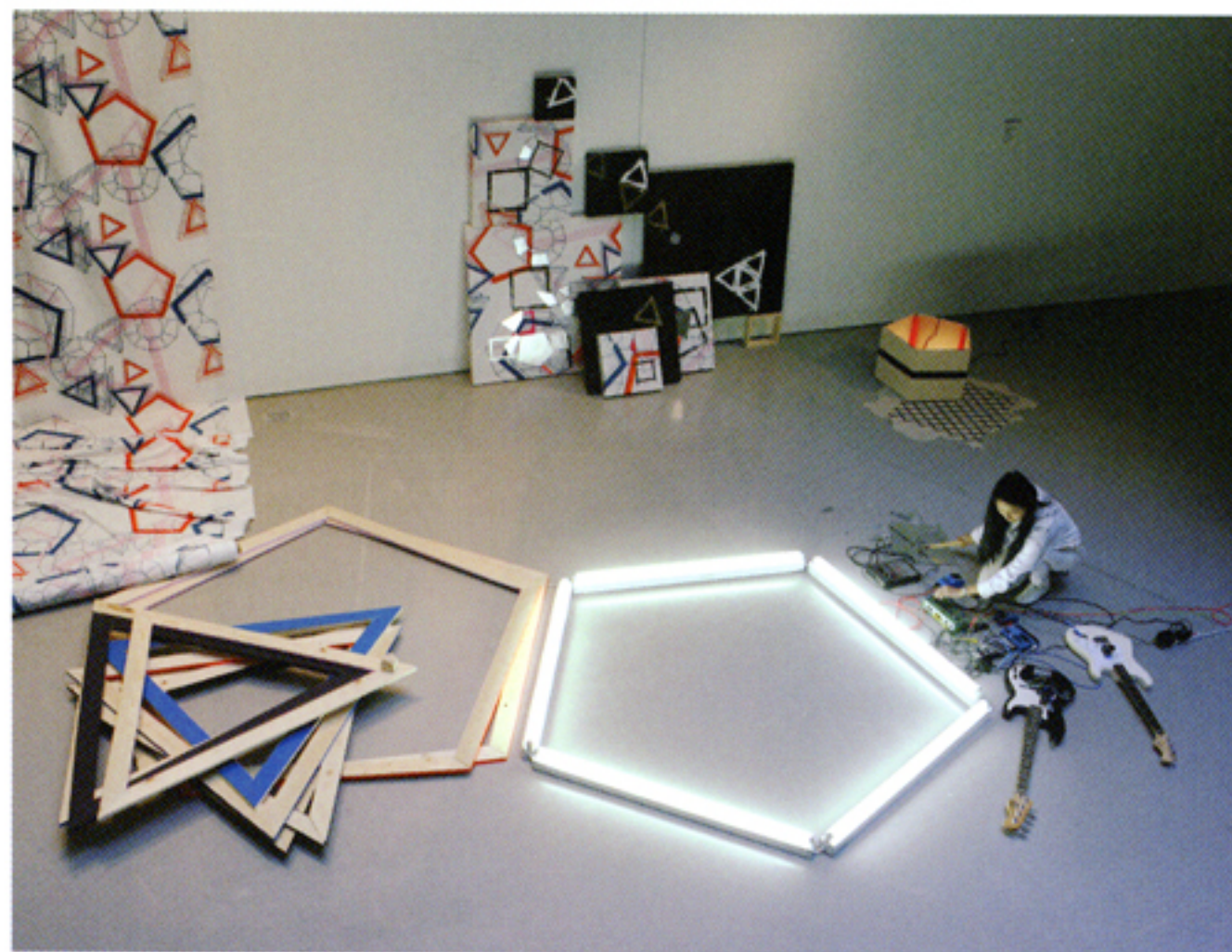
IN ORDER TO GRASP the modest yet evocative nature of Public-Holiday Projects—a “curatorial initiative” founded in 2004 by New York- and Los Angeles-based artists Rachel Foullon, Matt Keegan, and Laura Kleger—one might consider a performance by Mika Tajima last November on the opening night of the group’s exhibition “Bunch Alliance and Dissolve” at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. Clad in all white, Tajima knelt to the side of a pentagon made of Flavinesque fluorescent lights and gently struck a small pile of broken mirrors with a hammer. Feeding the resultant clinks and clanks through microphones, distortion pedals, a mixer, and two guitars (rigged with EBows, which turned the instruments into virtual violins), the artist produced spacey acoustic compositions that spilled through Zaha Hadid’s futuristic edifice—an echo effect compounded by Tajima’s nearby stacks of large neon-painted wooden shapes and canvases emblazoned with bright geometric figures. Together, the objects, sounds, and setting seemed a language of combinative forms, the kind of ephemeral crystallization of parts that is precisely what PHP are after.

Put another way, PHP employ a syntax of deferment in which every element leads to or informs another, but nothing settles into a static formal structure. For the tripartite CAC exhibition, Foullon, Keegan, and Kleger arranged work by twenty-seven mostly young artists in seven groupings, each represented by a different color—an arguably nonhierarchical ordering system. Eschewing curatorial intervention and didacticism, the team gave no explicit rationale for each grouping. Instead, those eager to work out meanings themselves were invited to visit the “Resource Room,” where the artists displayed various items that might elucidate their practices or complement their work in the “proper” show (though ephemera, for PHP, are never secondary). The exhibition’s third component was a publication—pointedly *not* a catalogue—which provided another space for the participants, in the same color-coded groupings, to present works and ideas not contained in the galleries.

Still in their early stages—this show being the group’s third outing—PHP place themselves in an art-historical lineage with earlier collaborative curatorial models. Julie Ault, formerly of Group Material (founded in 1979), contributed one of the publication’s main texts, which succinctly expresses what

seem to be PHP’s own views. “All aspects of making an exhibition—from inception to reception—involve social processes and dimensions,” she writes. “Consequently, I view exhibition-making as a political process that takes place in the cultural field.” Contending with the bureaucracy at the CAC was, the curators argue, no less a part of the show than were the objects on view. For both Group Material and PHP, the activity of exhibition-making, and the collaboration and compromise it requires, can legitimately be considered the work itself.

PHP’s founders claim that the group seeks to “preserve and extend a collective energy,” the likes of which is most commonly found among artists in a supportive school setting, where artworks are designed to provoke discussion as much as they’re meant to stand alone. (Foullon, Keegan, and Kleger are all recent graduates of Columbia University’s MFA program.) In the indeterminate, nonlinear structure of a PHP exhibition, a work’s value arises largely from its ability to “converse.” Tajima’s installation spoke eloquently with Hadid’s angular architecture as well as with the other works in the “blue” conversation, which (sometimes literally) reflected it, such as Morgan Fisher’s rectangular mirrors with film aspect ratios written in frosty characters and Carter Mull’s holographic floor made from photographs of a ceiling at various stages of its destruction. Dialogue with the building was apparent even in more delicate, materially spare works, such as Erika Vogt’s 2006– “Up Your Wall Forever” series of Richard Tuttle–like collages—sun-bleached wood scraps on white sheets of paper dotted with pinholes, which seemed, in their organic subtlety, to defy the harsh diagonals of Hadid’s design. Indeed, the CAC’s idiosyncratic architecture almost necessitates an exhibition plan defined by multiple centers, making it, in fact, the ideal location for PHP’s project of decentralization.



Mika Tajima, *Although Changed, Still the Same No Pure Form*, 2006. Performance view, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, 2006. Mika Tajima. Photo: Stephen Hilger.

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PHP endorse a curatorial model that allows works to linger on the level of potential, where they have the greatest associative and social value. The group’s skepticism toward finished objects and solo artists can be seen as a reaction to an art world increasingly streamlined to favor the discrete, the easily quantifiable, and the salable. Ault states that “Group Material’s most significant act of activism was to begin itself.” Calling PHP an “initiative,” Foullon, Keegan, and Kleger posit their project as existing permanently at just such a starting point. In James Yamada’s video *Gravity Understands Why We Build*, 2005 (also in the CAC show), people in a remote village in Ecuador stack seemingly disparate objects—water bottles, toy birds, plastic balls—on a windowsill overlooking a mountain-side. Once a participant considers his or her assemblage complete, the narrative pauses, the film cuts back to the empty sill, and the activity begins again. Likewise, PHP’s exhibition-making functions as a sort of repetition-compulsion—the constant “bunching” and “dissolving” of meanings and exhibitions—in which the perpetual edging toward common understanding is both a means and an end. □

KYLE BENTLEY IS AN ASSISTANT EDITOR OF ARTFORUM.