



The New York Times **Style** Magazine

HOLIDAY  
WINTER 2007

THE TALK

# Performance Upstart

MAURA EGAN LISTENS  
IN ON ALL THE  
RACKET MIKA TAJIMA  
IS MAKING.

With Damien Hirst reportedly selling a \$100-million diamond-encrusted skull and Louis Vuitton emblazoning bags with Richard Prince images, it's encouraging to watch the rising career of an artist like Mika Tajima. The New York-based Tajima incorporates many disciplines — performance, architecture, graphic design, sculpture, even fashion — into her art, making for esoteric work that isn't necessarily an easy sell to the new breed of hedge-fund collectors. Yet to curators and critics, Tajima is onto something.

For "Disassociate," her show at the Elizabeth Dee Gallery in Chelsea, she gave two live performances. The first of these, last February, featured her noise band New Humans, as well as Vito Acconci, another multimedia artist, who howled one of his poems into a microphone. ("New humans" is a colloquial term that older Japanese use to describe the younger generation that they can't understand. "It's kind of like Generation X," Tajima explains.) The gallery was set up as a quasirecording studio with modular cubicles separating each performer. The panels of the cubicles were covered in mirrors, textile patterns and a poem by Acconci.

Tajima took her inspiration from "Sympathy for the Devil," Jean-Luc Godard's documentary of the 1960s counterculture, which includes the Rolling Stones' recording session for the song: "I liked how Godard never showed the completion of the finished song. It was about repetition." Tajima orchestrated her piece in a similar fashion.

With the droning loop of her screeching guitar and Acconci's aggressive tone — punctuated by crackled feedback from the amps — the show was a sensory overload. And it went on and on. "The mirrored panels made it disorienting with all the breaks and fractures," recalls Katie Sonnenborn, a critic for *Frieze*

magazine. "Mika likes the antagonistic energy of her performances, the tensions and friction."

The work, which touches on Fluxus, Pop Art and minimalism, may seem unfathomable to some, but perhaps that's because it's ahead of the curve, a reaction the artist has gotten used to: "When I was at Columbia for grad school, I was in the new-genres division. It was their answer for anyone who didn't fit into painting or sculpture," says the 32-year-old, who has been selected for the 2008 Whitney Biennial and will have shows this spring at the Kitchen in New York as well as at the Centre for Opinions in Music and Art in Berlin.

"She's an incredibly smart, thoughtful artist," Sonnenborn says. Tajima's cultural knowledge is encyclopedic; she can riff on countless ideas, from the structuralism in the films of the avant-garde director Michael Snow to Daft Punk videos.

For the denouement of her second "Disassociate" performance, Tajima rocked a stack of Eames chairs back and forth, toppling them into a tower of Champagne glasses — the ear-shattering crash reverberated from attached microphones. Visitors ("interlopers," as Tajima put it) were invited to get up close and personal with the performers through it all.

"Mika is dealing with conceptual art issues, but it's also witty entertainment," says Judith Tannenbaum, a curator at the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, which has shown Tajima's pieces, including a video from her multimedia project "Grass Grows Forever in Every Possible Direction."

For that piece, Tajima collaborated with the fashion label United Bamboo to create several green-and-white rugby shirts with stripes stretching a few feet off the jerseys. She had a model photographed wearing the shirt and blew it up into a poster, plastering Manhattan with it, and then used vinyl tape to extend the stripes in all different directions. For a video performance, a New Humans band member played in the shirt, with his stripes held taut horizontally, undulating across him like musical staves. (Tajima explains that the "figure becomes de facto notes in the structure and composition.")

With the unusual happenings and the high-concept explanations, artists like Yoko Ono and Yayoi Kusama come to mind. So how would this multi-hyphenate artist describe her work? "It's as if Mike Kelley got together with Bridget Riley and had a mutated love child," she says. Long live the new humans. ■



Mika Tajima in her studio. Work not shown: sculpture, music, architecture, performance ...