

Matt Troy

Instructor: Jesse Birch

AHIS 304

September 29, 2011

Sakiko Yamoika: Brilliant or Ignorant?

Sakiko Yamoika is a Japanese live-performance artist. On her website she lists her interest in the body as a vessel whether it be physical, societal, personal or political. Thinking of her work in these constructs can be helpful.

My first interaction with Sakiko Yamoika occurred at VIVO media arts center during the LIVE biennial. We entered a well organized and arranged room compiled of chairs encircling a desk embellished with a lamp and a MacBook Pro. Sakiko began rather awkwardly to explain that she is going to do a performance and presented the audience with a time line. At this point I was unsure of this was some sort of metaperformance in which she described the segments of time each thing would take. I believe, with little conviction, that she was not performing yet. She asked for volunteers and recorded our names, mine among them, then spelled them down after much confusion and language difficulties.

This meeting/performance was the impetus for the work that would follow it on Wednesday. She explained to her Canadian audience that she was *Artist from Japan* and had traveled throughout much of the Japanese former colonies working on a project called "We Are Elegant". She then showed us several images from her practice. Villagers in 'elegant' poses standing with their hands to one side like a Geisha goddess or Harajuku Girl. In english she would ask them in heavy Japanese accent: "please

show me what is Elegant?”. The irony of social class become more and more apparent as old men lifted their canes to show Yamoika what elegance was. In one image a group of people pose in their local cemetery.



On Wednesday I arrived to Center A to ‘help’ with the performance as she had requested. She explained that today would be very unusual for her practice. She had decided to not use photography. She explained that people (in the downtown east side) did not want their photo taken while posing elegantly. She pulled two giant signs, one pink and one green, made out of bamboo stick and cardboard. On it she had written the symbolic statement “We Are Elegant”. She told me that earlier that week she had attended the Violence Against Women and Social Housing rally in the downtown east

side. As well the night before the rally a longtime resident and first nation member of the DTES had fallen out of the Regent building. She told us Japan is changing and that recently people have begun protesting there too.

We travelled through the DTES armed with two large signs, a bag of felts, a bucket of flowers and an Army and Navy bag of soap. Awkwardly Yamoika would approach people, some of which wondered what we were doing or protesting while others were annoyed or offended. She would ask them to write down their favorite word or message on the sign. It began very awkwardly but Yamoika was unfazed and fearless often playing up her foreigner status. When she would approach people I would explain to them that she is a touring artist from Japan. Through quiet murmurs and mutters they would agree or disagree to participate in the project. People wrote many anecdotal phrases such as: live and let live, freedom, be happy. Others wrote poetry. Some related what they wrote to the current Regent Hotel tragedy. Many people donated the flowers they received for participating to the make shift memorial for Verna on Hastings St. Some people were confused and others were offended. One man spoke up saying that he was disgusted with people like us. A lady in a pink track suit said, "I won't sign that because I don't know what that means! What are you saying? You are elegant and we are not?". One lady asked: "Why are you giving us flowers?", another said, "I don't need the soap are you saying I am dirty?!".

The symbology of these cultural objects and phrases was latent with discrepancies. If Yamoika knew this she let no clue. In many ways I feel as though I have been duped. Did she trick me into believing she was naive? Is this what she does with her life: traveling around the world and creating strange ironies and ethical dilemma

while pretending to be unaware of the chaos she creates? What is *elegant*? These questions are testament to her work. I do not know the answers. Just as Yamoika would say “I ask because I do not know”.