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Aki Sasamoto

JTT



Aki Sasamoto, *Wrong Happy Hour*, 2014.
 Performance view,
 November 2, 2014.

With its Emeralite-green pendant lamps overhead and its chalkboard sidewalk sign, the mise-en-scène at Aki Sasamoto's recent performances at JTT's living-room-size space held the promise of a particularly cozy strain of relational art: the gallery as site for a libation-fueled, slightly sweaty gathering meant to foster conviviality. That impression only grew as the artist—before launching into her signature mix of monologue, febrile live drawing, and interactions with everyday objects—began by serving fresh-brewed espresso while a Stan Getz and João Gilberto track played in the background.

But as it quickly became clear, there was trouble in the air. The piece's title, *Wrong Happy Hour*, 2014, had the overtones of a fete gone awry. And those who stayed for the entirety of her performance—she staged the piece publicly three times over the course of the exhibition's run—found themselves forced to experience controlled panic and claustrophobia when the gallery's back wall, which turned out to be mobile, began inching forward. As the space shrank like the garbage compactor in *Star Wars*, visitors were pressed chest-to-chest, then forced outside into the cold evening, their exodus spurred on by the artist's shouts: "Get out!"

Like a stand-up comedian, Sasamoto played the performer as grump, antagonizing her audience members to charm them, and like a vaudevillian, she built punch lines from absurdist interactions with repurposed objects. Near the show's beginning, she donned a pair of novelty periscope glasses, and, with her field of vision now rotated downward ninety degrees, trundled through the crowd. But Sasamoto—who in the past has staged anonymous street performance as well as gallery-sited projects—is concerned with, in her words, "the power of meaning in each object," and, more than slapstick props, her MacGyvered apparatuses become sculptural counterpoints to her monologues' idées fixes. At JTT, while opining on her inability to relate to concepts such as romance, she put on trick glasses whose thick lenses were actually receptacles into which she then poured espresso—her obscured vision becoming a metaphor, perhaps, for her own lack of insight.

Wrong Happy Hour featured nods to past performance traditions. When the artist disappeared through a panel in the mobile wall (which let her propel it forward unseen), one thought of the trapdoors and mechanized stage sets in Kyogen theater and Victorian pantomime. But rather than merely delivering the spectacle of such productions, Sasamoto's work also asked her audience to identify with her subjective experiences. Take the periscope glasses, which invited onlookers not only to find comic relief in her odd posture but also to understand her bumbings by imagining her skewed visual field. As such, much of *Wrong Happy Hour* seemed to be about the artist's own peculiar outlook—and about the unbridgeable gulf between self and other. While drawing diagrams on the wall, she asked, "How can I know what [romance] is?" She then added, "I don't really know what the opposite sex thinks about, or any opposite person."

For all the solipsistic self-reflection at the root of Sasamoto's poetic ruminations, her piece cast its audience in a remarkably complex light. Unlike performances that give onlookers one of several stock roles—the pious in a solemn ritual, say, or flies on a wall—Sasamoto made her participants many things at once: confidants, gawkers, and nuisances. They were called on to empathize, but kept at arm's length, too.

—Dawn Chan