

Villa Tokyo

DECEMBER 07, 2011 by *Richard Unwin*



A vacant office with a low ceiling and a tatty floor. Bright orange and yellow prints line the windows and walls, but the space is littered with detritus and lumps of cement. Walking into Elodie Seguin's collaborative exhibition with Christoph Weber – part of Villa Tokyo, a week-long event straddling the territory between art fair, gallery weekend and arts festival – the tarnished room could have been mistaken for an unfinished decorating job. Centered around an untitled series of abstract silkscreens, Seguin had played with the fabric of the exhibition space by introducing subtle interventions: a roll of wallpaper spilling out from the wall, a square of tape on the floor, an absent carpet tile. Joined by Weber, the two artists then placed works around the room, amongst them, Weber's sculptural piles of moist cement.



Foreground: Christoph Weber; background: Elodie Seguin

Seguin creates layered installations that blur work and location. A sympathetic companion with whom Seguin has exhibited before, Weber's contribution here also offered levels of aesthetic interest; the contrast of textures, the contours of geography in miniature. The conceptual substance of Weber's sculptures, however, came rather in their incongruous placement, a disjunction that invited new perspectives on both the objects and the space they occupied. It is the kind of art easily dismissed by its detractors, but this was an exhibition that upheld Seguin's initial intention of creating a three-dimensional sketch into which the viewer could step.



Performance by pianist Marcin Masecki

Presented by Paris-based Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, the Seguin-Weber exhibition felt like the defining stage-piece amidst Villa Tokyo's wider narrative of informal, transient experimentation. Conceived by Warsaw's Raster gallery and realized with local partner galleries, the Tokyo edition followed previous Villa events in Warsaw in 2006, and Reykjavik in 2010. Employing a similar format to its predecessors, Villa Tokyo saw exhibitions staged by 19 European and Japanese galleries, alongside special projects and live performances by the likes of Berlin-based artist duo Prinz Gholam and Polish pianist Marcin Masecki.

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Amidst a forcefully conceptual selection light on visual thrills, a desire to deconstruct, to isolate cultural phenomena and to subvert norms by way of surreal interventions could be seen repeated across exhibitions. Positioned beside the entrance to Villa Tokyo's main, multi-storey venue, a so-called collateral project, 'Art Vending Machine', curated by the independent Warsaw space Witryna, consisted of a typical, confectionary-dispensing cabinet filled instead with tiny art works, amongst them a pottery ornament intended to smash on purchase. Similarly ironic in its approach to the consumer economy, be it in art or daily life, Koki Tanaka's video *Someone's Junk is Someone Else's Treasure* (2011), presented by Tokyo's Aoyama Meguro gallery, followed the artist in his attempt to sell ubiquitous – and therefore worthless – palm leaves to the unimpressed residents of LA. In both cases, the probing of consumerism was contextually apt, but the effect was more one of jest than satire.



Another collateral exhibition, housed in one of the many empty office spaces used by Villa Tokyo, provided a solo showcase for playful, Iranian-born maverick Navid Nuur. Intelligently conceived, Nuur's work often centres on something hidden, or rather something waiting to be revealed. Arranged within a deceptively minimal display, examples here included two untitled works from 2011. In the first case, a volcano-shaped pile of salt and iron dust was manipulated by a hidden magnet. In the second, a red neon ampersand glowed on the wall. 'And what do you think?' might be a simple interpretation. Contained inside the neon tubing, though, were the ashes of Nuur's burned notebooks, the suggested conjunction lying somewhere between artistic conception and the reality of what is actually realized.



Navid Nuur

With Villa Tokyo an openly exotic adventure for many of its participants, the interplay between art as self-indulgence and valued creative output was a relevant topic to explore. If there is a paradox in this interplay then Raster artist Aneta Grzeszykowska – whose enchanting high-definition video, *Bolimorphia* (2008–10), was the most aesthetically striking work on show – pointed to it in a statement describing her practice in the Villa Tokyo catalogue. ‘In the present social circumstances,’ Grzeszykowska explained, ‘I feel as though I was devoting my time to some kind of hobby [...] I make art for purely egotistic reasons and that is why the working process itself is so very important to me.’ Universalizing such questions of self-worth in a time of socio-economic crisis, *I’m Protesting Against Myself* (2011), a video by Ciprian Mureşan – co-authored by fellow Romanian Gianina Carbuariu and screened by the Cluj- and Berlin-based gallery Plan B – neatly reversed the ire of protesters chastising the actions of others with a Muppet-like hand-puppet seeking supporters to join his protest against himself. While Grzeszykowska embraces her egotism then, Mureşan’s puppet seeks to petition against his, but both reflect an uneasiness about an individual’s value to society.



Exterior of a Villa Tokyo venue

There's no reason of course that others can't benefit from a stranger's indulgence of their own ego, or by eavesdropping on their existential journey. Fans of art have been doing that since time immemorial. Beyond the individual experiences of its participants, Villa Tokyo's outward worth is perhaps best attributed to its willingness to innovate. The resulting artistic expression did not make things easy for its audience, but that was never the point. After staging two Villa events in two years, Raster now expect to take a rest in 2012, but it is likely the project will resurface somewhere in the world in the next few years.

About the author

Richard Unwin is a freelance writer based in London, UK.