

Is Istanbul a smart city?



MIKA TAJIMA, VIEW FROM EMOTION COMMUNE EXHIBITION, COURTESY OF 5533

Robbie-Lee Valentine interviewed Mika Tajima on her latest solo exhibition 'Emotion Commune' organized by Protocinema at 5533.

Please tell us more about your relationship with digital technology. How do you incorporate this into your work?

It is undeniable that digital technologies have transformed these fields you mentioned and creative producers, including artists, have integrated these new technical tools, equipment, and modes of working native to logic and flow digital production. However, I see my work as an examination of technology itself, specifically how technologies are inseparable from power and interests that seek to shape an outcome, a body, and a society. That is why I have been interested in architecture, office design, ergonomics, fitness, and self-care as subjects in my research and artwork. These are sites in which different types of technologies are employed to maximize activities and life. My interest is in unpacking the relationship between technology and culture of maximization, which is often tied to greater control on us and less freedom to do whatever. We need whatever freedom more and more, I think. My recent Meridian mood light sculptures uses 'smart' technology as a tool to produce an experience and a space of questioning. It's less a demonstration of consumer technology as it is making subject our consumption of a certain type of technology. That is, 'smart' technology is part of a larger system to connect people, and objects, and cities together in unprecedented ways - to what ends?

What is a smart city and what significance does Istanbul have with this idea?

Through my research, I found out that in 2015, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) created a 'smart city' initiative by joining an international consortium of state and corporate entities to integrate technologies that seek to streamline city operations for citizens and enhance crisis and disaster management including civil unrest. That means a certain type of technology has been adopted by the city that would affect all citizens in a very specific way. These 'smart city' initiatives are always implemented in the name of "quality of life". I was interested in this argument and reason — also questioning a technology that is implemented from above on citizens.

For *Emotion Commune*, I had Istanbul as a city specifically in mind when conceiving the show -- this was also informed by my visit to the city. In thinking of a city that I would connect with the exhibition, I wanted to choose a city that was both distant to Istanbul but also had very specific shared technological conditions. I chose New Songdo City in Korea as the 'light source' for the exhibition because it is touted as the model of a fully integrated 'smart city' of the future -- built from scratch from a master plan. By linking these two sites and cities, I was hoping to create a space and image of the 'emotion commune' of people living in a transformational city space.

"The installation employs language processing technology that uses computer algorithms to interpret data scraped from thousands of Twitter feeds per second using software to detect human emotion." This is quite a feat, how does this idea actually manifest itself in your work?

The infrastructure is widespread and global. It involves someone tweeting in New Songdo Korea, a server in New York to process the tweet as light color information, a server somewhere else in the world to instruct the bulb in Istanbul to turn a specific color — all in real time. The color of the lights respond in real time to the aggregate sentiment of citizens in New Songdo City, a new master plan 'smart city' in South Korea (5,000 miles away) considered to be a template for urban futurity in which the entire environment is embedded with computational technologies that provide urban management and regulation. The Wi-Fi-enabled 'smart' lights that I use in the Meridian light sculptures draw on this very technology. And in this way, it brings the exhibition space into the network of *The Internet of Things*, a technology that seeks to integrate physical objects in the world with sensing and data gathering technologies.

The feed from New Songdo City is scraped and analyzed by a custom sentiment analysis program that uses natural language processing to extract sentiment information from an individual tweet -- it looks at individual words, phrases, and machine learned usages to give each tweet a quantified sentiment value -- on a positive and negative scale. The analyzed tweets are averaged and the light colors of each sculpture change as this number fluctuates. Two colors are assigned to negative

and positive sentiment values and its intensities.

Where did the idea of *Emotion Commune* come about and what did you expect from your viewers?

I'm interested in this concept that Hannah Arendt describes as 'social evaporation': When something that is specific and tangible becomes abstracted and immaterial through a process of transformations, moving from different equivalences and states. In *Emotion Commune* there are material elements such as the transparent paintings on the wall and the light fixtures but there are also immaterial elements such as light that have different qualities and react to distant things (tweets that appear as shifting light/color and changing the color tone of the gallery space). In a world where globalism is the assumed and the modus operandi, maybe it will give us pause to think what this globalism--these abstractions and equivalences--manifest and shape our lives.

The Meridian light installation at Protocinema essentially transforms the entire space into a lighting appliance — one that emits vibrant and shifting colored light to create different affective zones within the environs of the Istanbul Textile Traders Market. The space becomes a lamp that affects its surroundings, broadcasting distant emotions that have been analyzed, computed, and transformed -- not pure emotion but a mediated one.

Tell us more about what's coming up for you?

I am doing a public commission with Sculpture Center based here in NYC. For this public artwork, I will create a vaporous disappearing sculpture—a void that also functions as seating and meeting zone—filled with mercurial color vapor, which dissipates in a matter of minutes. The colors of the vapor will correspond to real-time global sentiment for gold commodity, a peculiar material that derives its value from the social perception of its qualities and the collective "mood" toward geopolitical and economic events. These vapors will bathe the viewer in these complex sentiments embodied in gold, as a material with such fluid and dematerialized exchangeability. Reflecting on the materiality of contemporary life, this object is a ghost or mirage of a familiar object—a fleeting visual trace of a material form as it fades into abstraction—into thin air. I am also participating in the Gwangju Biennial opening September 2016. // RW