

## 1-800-Anxiety

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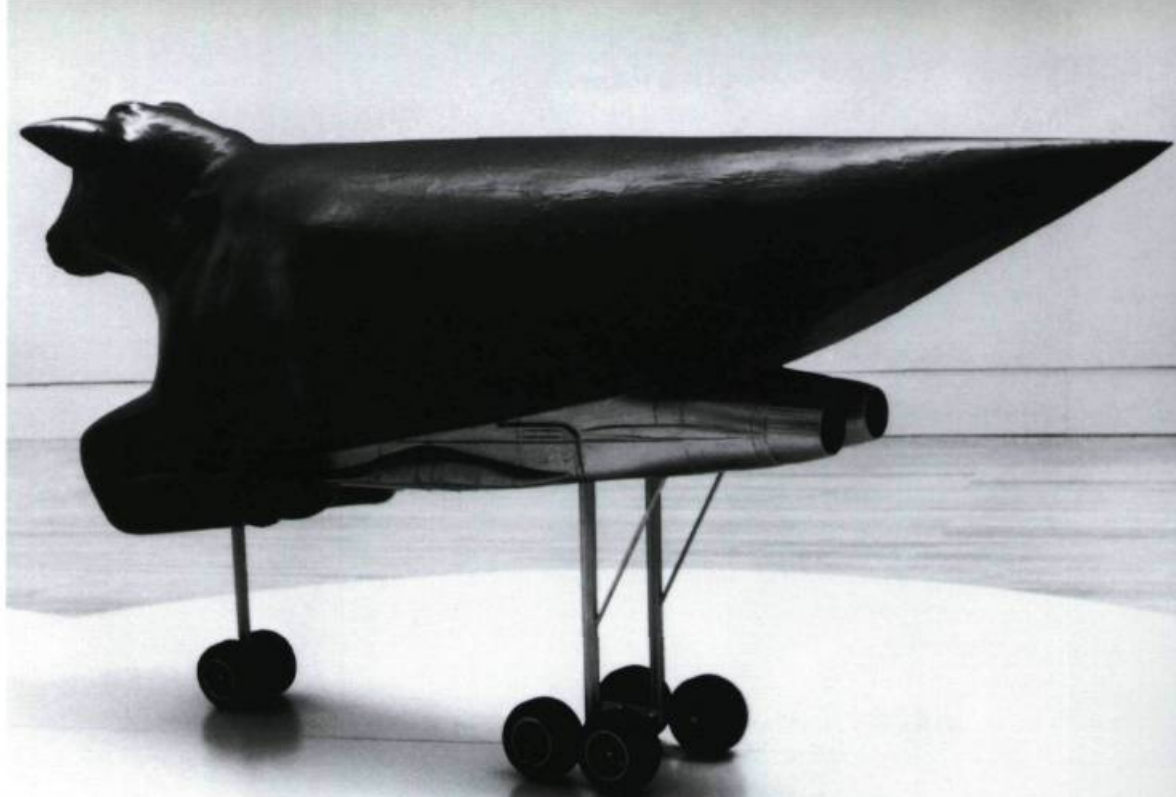
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Taro Chiezo, *The Edge of Chaos*, 1994. Acrylic on SRP and metal. Courtesy of the artist, Shiraishi Contemporary Art, Japan, and Sandra Gering Gallery, New York. The Power Plant, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto.



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# 1-800-ANXIETY

Japanese artists seem increasingly conscious of their role as international players on the arts scene. While in such shows as in *A Primal Spirit*, the last great show of contemporary Japanese art held at the National Gallery of Canada in the summer of 1991, this was commendable, *The Age of Anxiety* reflects a self-conscious, vacuum sealed approach to art that carefully plans out its message and then presents it as an effect rather than a truth. These bright young Japanese artists, originally from Kyoto and Tokyo, are fatalistic and cynical, not only about the present but also the future. Like bit players in a one act *pièce de théâtre* (certainly not Beckett), their works address social issues of a present and future prescribed by technology, as much as by business and bureaucracy. Japan's relation to its feudal past, from what we see in this show, appears as ambiguous as its future.

In most cases, these artists are *shinjinrui* (new-generation man) who decry the forces that are fragmenting Japan's once homogeneous society through simple escapism or a playful sense of theatricality. But just as Japan's titular place as one of the world's business and political leaders mars these artists' vision, the social hedonism, avoidance and delight their works describe also inevitably play into the hands of global political and economic control. Those same political and business (read arts) interests (The Japan Foundation, A, T & T, Canadian Airlines International, etc.) actually sponsored their show, gesturing with big sponsorship bucks to ensure contemporary Japanese art a prominent place on the world's stage. Do these works truly reflect new polarities between Japan's past and present, the scars, or anxiety Japanese author Kenzaburo Oe referred to when he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994? One wonders if somewhere back in Japan, out of the spotlight and unsponsored, there are artists working towards a more integral vision.

Taro Chiezo's hybrid half-machine, half-animal *The Edge of Chaos* creatures, installed on walls (*Calf-Engine*-1994) and on the floor (*Lamb-Banana NY1*-1994) of The Power Plant, are a kind of die-cast designer nightmare, a benign futurist's recognition of technology's indelible imprint on the natural and human world. A headless deer with a vacuum cleaner and nine

small hybrid breasts fused to it, a metallic blue calf with a fuselage welded onto its rear end: these part synthetic, part organic beasts of the techno-future inhabit a universe with no sense of its origins or future direction. According to Chiezo, dualistic criteria no longer apply. He states: "Matter and phenomena, living things and machines, mind and body, nature and artifice, desires and morals, existence and nothingness—all of these have to be reconciled."<sup>1</sup> These brightly coloured creatures are nevertheless irreverent curiosity pieces or confabulated techno-candies that willfully inhabit this non-space. Chiezo's work decries any sense of responsibility or respect for the ecological systems and forces of natural forces we will always depend upon. Issues such as medical technology's genetic engineering of living species become a one-liner, but one enacted in a void-like endgame universe.

In Noboru Tsubaki's own words, his goal in life is "to live somewhere between bureaucratic systems and kitsch." As an exploration of the shallowness of an increasingly global kitsch culture of distraction and the bureaucratization of many aspects of modern life, Tsubaki's hysterically huge plastic parakeets, collectively titled *Polly Zeus* (1994), tended to debase art to the level of superficial attraction. Perched in the air on the ground floor of The Power Plant, these gigantesque cousins to something you might buy at a



Yoshiko Shimada, *Look At Me, Look At You*, 1995. Multi media installation. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo. The Power Plant, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto.



Dollar Store for your children one day, and throw into the recycling box for future meltdown the next, are aggrandized replicas of the plastic companion birds one puts in birdcages to amuse the live birds. One could see them in bright jelly bean type colours lit up in the unreal glow of sodium vapour lamps at night.

Ideal Copy, *Channel: Exchange*, 1995. Mixed media installation. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the Collective, with assistance from Shiseido Co. Ltd, Tokyo. The Power Plant, Harbourfront Centre, Toronto.

Ideal Copy's *Channel: Exchange* (1995) booth, with surveillance camera and attendant security guard, invited visitors to step up and exchange their foreign currency (anything but local Canadian currency) for Ideal Copy's art money coins. An assistant seated behind a desk wearing white gloves weighed the coins in an electronic balance, which then printed

out a receipt with the day's date, rate of exchange and total weight in grams whereupon one finally received the arbitrary equivalent in Ideal copy art money. As visitors went to look at the pile of accumulated foreign money sitting in a display case, they could also see others doing the same thing on a video display nearby. While Ideal Copy questioned the superficiality of a society driven by money, the real medium of exchange was not art but Ideal Copy's vacuous social commentary on the global political economy. So explicit were these issues, and enacted with such a sublime sense of realistic detail, the intended theatricality of this quasi-performance piece sidelined any

potential it had to encourage the public to question these issues. In effect Ideal Copy became an Ideal Copy of what it critiqued.

Yuji Kitagawa's *The Rule of Actions* (1992-94) adopted the cliché that clothes make a man in an attempt to address the breakdown of social order and collective identity in today's Japan. One piece comprised an incongruous, torso-shaped bodice or tailor's dummy made up of Scotch tartan and black plastic/leather with an upside down hat on top. A video nearby presented a slapstick Chaplinesque scenario of two identical looking men wearing identical hats, shirts and ties, in the act of putting on and taking off the same grey and black pant and blazer sets, all irrevocably sewn together and designed by the famed Japanese designer Comme des Garçons, in a never ending purposeless action. As one was in the process of putting the clothing on, the other was taking it off, and vice versa. A performance about the loss of, and confusion about, individual identity in a society increasingly fixated on outward appearance, echoed Japan's ritualistic religious traditions, which also involve repeated actions.

Yukinori Yanagi's *Wandering Position* (1995) installation included a video of the artist crawling about on his knees (he did this for a week) following an ant with a red magic marker recording its sporadic industry as it moved to and fro within a steel frame. Adjacent to the video monitor, one could see the actual site of the action. The markings covered the floor of the gallery like a crazy abstract. The steel frame had been opened up just slightly. *Asia Pacific Ant Farm* (1995) consisted of an immense assemblage of transparent boxes on a wall depicting the flags of many of the world's nations composed of layers of coloured sand. Each of these "flags" was connected to those above, beside and below it by an ingenious network of plastic tubing. Inside, one could see harvester ants industriously moving the material back and forth along the tube/tunnels from one box to the next. Over the duration of the exhibition, as the ants continued to build their nests and passageways, the flags gradually disintegrated and became virtually unidentifiable. Fed on a diet of honey and water located in a tray in the back of the piece, these ants eventually died as no Queen ant was present. Another load of harvester ants were subsequently brought up from Utah. As a comment on the old New World Order and the decline of nationalism, Yanagi's piece was succinct and to the point, but as to whether it was art, one could never really be sure.

Shigeaki Iwai's esoteric *100 Hummings* (1994) installation comprised rows of





