Wadsworth Atheneum
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

Yukinori Yanagi / MATRIX 128
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The spectacle of the...ants, their colonies locked in chronic border skirmishes like so many Italian city-states, exemplifies a condition found throughout the social insects. Ants in particular are arguably the most aggressive and warlike of all animals. They far exceed human beings in organized nastiness; our species is by comparison gentle and sweet-tempered. The foreign policy of ants can be summed up as follows: restless aggression, territorial conquest, and genocidal annihilation of neighboring colonies whenever possible. If ants had nuclear weapons, they would probably end the world in a week.


Yukinori Yanagi, an influential young Japanese artist, has helped lead contemporary Japanese art to a new place. A radical in the context of post-war Japanese art, Yanagi asserts the prerogative of Japanese artists to make art that is openly critical of Japanese society — its conventions, its government, and its deceits.

According to myth, the Sun Goddess created the islands of Japan. One of her descendants, Jimmo Tenno, became the first emperor in 660 B.C. Supposedly all “racially-pure” Japanese can trace their lineage to this first emperor and, through him, to the Sun Goddess. This xenophobic obsession with national purity requires Japanese citizens of foreign ancestry to be finger-printed every five years to maintain their status as legal residents.

For more than two dozen centuries, the ancient and revered traditions that have zealously protected the semi-divine status of an unbroken line of Japanese emperors (and protected, by extension, the power of the ruling oligarchy) also repressed almost any public critique. Industriousness on the job, civil obedience at all times, and, until the end of World War II, blind devotion to the modern imperial system (tenno-set) have been understood to be the obligation of every Japanese citizen. Open challenge to the authority of this system was unthinkable.

Over the past decade, Yanagi’s work has examined the behavior of his own country and, more broadly, concepts of

national borders and nationhood. To Yanagi, such institutions are strategies for social control. These issues inform both works in this exhibition. America (1994) is a live-ant farm made up of thirty-six colored-sand paintings in individual plastic boxes, each representing a flag of the countries of North and South America. In Wandering Position (1995), Yanagi tracks with red crayon every movement of an ant confined to a paper surface of 14' x 15'. This ant-following project took place in Yanagi’s New York studio for a few hours a day over the course of seven days.

Charged icons of power, such as flags, Yen signs (¥), and the imperial crest, have formed the basis of Yanagi’s visual vocabulary. Such symbols are, by definition, static and rigidly protected. Yanagi, however, disrupts the ways in which these signs function by placing them at the mercy of active, fluid, and sometimes random systems. Says Yanagi: “My intention is to dissolve the symbolic signs of stasis into an organic form that changes with time and circumstance.”

Motion and movement, transportation and transformation have proven to be among Yanagi’s most effective interventions. In the context of Yanagi’s work, the ants parallel our restless urban culture of automobiles, subway systems, and neon signs, which in themselves have also occupied Yanagi’s attention. These metaphors of urban life and social organization co-exist with the darker and more troubling realities of entrapment, forced accommodation, and constraint.

In Wandering Position (1995), for instance, the radical disjunction of scale between Yanagi and the single ant establishes a startlingly unequal power relationship. Confined within a limited space and trailed for a week, the ant is, in effect, held under a rigorous and oppressive surveillance. Says Kyong Park in reference to the disturbing themes of Yanagi’s work: “We need to wander but our positions are fixed...”

Although the divinity of the emperor was abruptly outlawed on August 15, 1945 — just fifty years ago — the associated patterns of social control and the sacrifice of individualism to the interests of the state have proven to be deeply embedded in Japan’s national psyche. This resistance to change and lack of candor about the past have directly benefited the present-day political and economic fortunes of many of those who held power during Japan’s aggressive Fifteen-Year War (1931-1945). Many of those individuals whose decisions during that time led to the suffering of other

Asian peoples occupied by Japan’s brutal military forces and to the extreme sacrifices asked of Japanese citizens themselves have attained positions of privilege and influence. Only recently have government statements addressed issues of accountability and collective responsibility.

The death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989 marked the end of the Showa Era (1926-1989). To some degree, this has allowed for a liberation of public discourse. However, even in the early 1980s as a painting major at Musashino Art University in Tokyo, Yanagi was determined to scrutinize prevailing taboos. In 1984, after having been warned that “graduation work must be limited to flat surface work only” and told that oil colors must be used, Yanagi created a large sculpture made of wooden frames. This work, his graduating thesis, was deemed “not painting” and excluded from the school’s culminating exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Tokyo. The following year, on the occasion of his first one-person exhibition, Yanagi defiantly burned the sum total of his art school efforts and exhibited the ashes in a group of large, wooden boxes, a work he titled Ground Transport Project (1985).

Yanagi’s installation America (1994) confronts us with a metaphor for the fragility of national identities as the individual, self-contained flags of state disintegrate before us. The boxes are placed in a grid formation, with plastic tubes connecting each flag to its neighbors. Yanagi introduces harvester ants (Pogonomyrmex barbatus) into this static environment. The ants travel throughout the piece (without passports) unwittingly dismantling national symbols and indifferently blending allied and enemy territories as they busily transport sand grains from one place to another. Ironically, these refugees from intensely territorial colonies are innocent when transported to an alien system. As Yanagi reminds us, “Ants know no national borders.”

Reflecting both the political realities of mass migration and expanding global networks of communication and trade, America suggests that nationalism is part illusion, part elaborate myth. The dissolusion of the borders between these icons of nationalism offers us one vision of our geo-political future and acknowledges the presence of randomness and chaos in the universe. Says Yanagi: “The flags will become intermixed, their recognizable symbol will dissolve and evolve into one universal flag.”

America was originally commissioned for inSITE94 by the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Sponsored by

38 non-profit visual arts institutions, *inSITE94* was an ambitious public art project which featured site-specific work by over 100 artists at more than 70 sites throughout the San Diego/Tijuana region. Each artist was invited to address issues which surround the complex cultural politics of living on one side of a carefully-policed border.

Yanagi has been working with ants and self-contained ant farm pieces since 1985. He observes in retrospect, "I was trying to express my desperate desire to get out of the ghettos of Japanese art education, Japanese modern art, and the
Japanese art system.” In 1988, as a research fellow in sculpture at Yale University’s School of Art and Architecture, Yanagi discovered exciting new cross-disciplinary possibilities, but also new ghettos and new sets of constraints.

In marked contrast to his homeland, Yanagi observed while at Yale, “The influx of people of diverse nationalities, races, and religions is the foundation by which America was born.” It was at Yale that he first began the World Flag Ant Farm Project and the Ant Following Plan.
Yanagi’s razor-sharp sensibilities and commitment to social justice have exposed widely-accepted patterns of political, national, and ethnic oppression. His work, along with others, has begun to lift burdens of silence in his native land and elsewhere. Indeed, since his early days as an art student, Yanagi has been courageous in his determination to question assumptions, to deviate from unjust official regulations, and to assert individual expression and creativity as an act of resistance.

Yukinori Yanagi was born in 1959 in Fukuoka on the southern island of Kyushu, Japan. Fukuoka is the closest prefecture to the Korean Peninsula (and less than 100 miles from Nagasaki). He attended the Musashino University of Fine Arts, receiving a BFA in 1983 and an MFA in 1985. From 1988 to 1990, Yanagi was a post-graduate fellow at Yale University, receiving an MFA in sculpture. He moved to New York City in 1992, with the support of an Asian Cultural Council Fellowship. In 1993, he received the Swatch Award at the Aperto at the Venice Biennale for his World Flag Ant Farm (1990). During the past several years, he has divided his time between studios in Kamifukuoka, Japan and New York City.

Andrea Miller-Keller
Emily Hall Tremaine Curator
of Contemporary Art
Wandering Position: places, borders, boundaries, transportation, and entrapments.

The environment that surrounds us is a collection of places. Because of their abstract nature, "places" require something to support or define them. "Borders" serve this purpose. Our environment can also be seen as a collection of borders. Though borders can serve as clear partitions in the physical world, they also function as imaginary boundaries borne out of social or institutional constructs. Within a given set of borders we try to give meaning to the common values of our place. Going one step beyond our boundaries we discover that these shared values may or may not be sovereign in another place. When something foreign from one place engages in intercourse with a neighboring place, both areas vibrate in relation to one another. Crossing borders expends energy and, at the same time, through the crossing of borders, energy is generated. A place is a repository of power and that power becomes amplified as things travel back and forth across the boundaries.

The world that surrounds us is a collection of places. Through upholding and acting upon our various personal contracts and promises, we live in several places; our societies are imaginary phenomena that are built upon a foundation of promises.

Today, nations are dependent upon each other for commerce. A complex network of telecommunications and trade makes the world available to people of advanced nations. At present my work looks towards a simple, equal, and hopeful way of expressing the gradual unification of all of the world’s nations.

Yukinori Yanagi

PLEASE NOTE:

Andrea Miller-Keller, Emily Hall Tremaine Curator of Contemporary Art, will present gallery talks on the exhibition on Sunday, September 17, 1995 at 2:00 p.m. and on Tuesday, September 19, 1995 at noon.

James Rondeau, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, will give a gallery talk on the exhibition on Tuesday, October 24, 1995 at noon. All events are free with museum admission.

Special thanks to Motoko Cho for her assistance in the preparation of this exhibition.

WORKS in MATRIX:

America, 1994, live ants, colored sand, a grid of 36 plastic boxes each 11.4” x 7.6”, installation variable.

Wandering Position, 1995, red crayon, beeswax, pigment and graphite on paper, 168” x 180”, four steel angles, 120” x 3” x 1/8” each. Accompanied by video and monitor, running time 120 minutes.
**Selected One-Person Exhibitions:**

Gallery Center Point, Tokyo, Japan ’85 ’86; Hillside Gallery, Tokyo ’87,’90,’91; Kanagawa Prefectural Gallery, Japan ’86; Gallery Natsuka, Tokyo ’86; Yale University Art and Architecture Gallery, New Haven, CT ’90; Storefront for Art and Architecture, NYC ’90; Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles, CA ’91; Lehman College Art Gallery, NYC ’91; Fuji Television Gallery, Tokyo, ’92; Naoshima Contemporary Art Museum, Kagawa, Japan ’92; Ars Futura, Zurich, Switzerland ’93; Anthony d’Offay Gallery, London, England ’94; Queens Museum of Art, NYC ’95 (Traveled also to Kirin Plaza Osaka, Japan ’95); Peter Blum Gallery, NYC ’95.

**Selected Group Exhibitions:**

Metropolitan Museum of Tokyo 17th Contemporary Art Exhibition of Japan ’85; Memorial Park of Tokorozawa Airfield, Japan Open-air Exhibition ’85; Gallery Yoh, Tokyo ’85,’86,’87; Hamamatsu, Japan 6th Open-air Art Exhibition ’86; Tochigi, Japan Ohyo Underground Art Exhibition ’86; Kanagawa Prefectural Museum, Yokohama, Japan The 1st Kanagawa Art Annual ’87; Hamamatsu 7th Open-air Art Exhibition ’87; Ohturayama Memorial Hall, Yokohama, Japan ART-MOVE ’87; Tochigi Prefectural Museum, Japan Art Document ’87 ’87; P.S. 1 Museum, NYC New York Diary: Almost Twenty-Five Different Things ’91, In Their Own Image ’93; Galerie Ghislaine Hussenot, Paris, France By Arrangement ’92; Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo My Sweet Home in Rain: Urban Environment and Art in Japan ’92; Shedhalle, Zurich, Switzerland Exchange 2 ’93; Venice Biennale, Italy Aperto ’93 ’93; The New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC Trade Routes ’93; Yokohama Museum of Art, Kanagawa, Japan Japanese Art after 1945: Scream Against the Sky ’94 (Traveled also to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, NYC ’94; jointly to Center for the Arts at Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco, CA and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, CA ’95); Art Tower Mito, Ibaragi, Japan Mito Annual: Open System ’94; Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, Ohio Old Glory ’94; Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan Asian Art Now ’94; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, CA inSITE94 ’94; Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo Art in Japan Today 1985-1995 ’95; Kukje Gallery, Seoul, Korea Border Crawl ’95; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebaek, Denmark Japan Today ’95; Power Plant, Toronto, Canada Age of Anxiety ’95.
Selected Bibliography about Yukinori Yanagi:


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Turner, Jonathan. “Where Ant Lovers Fear to Tread?” ARTnews vol. 92 no. 10 (September ’93), p.70.

Koplos, Janet. “Rockets and Refrigerators,” Art in America vol. 81 no. 7 (July ’93), p. 66+.

Kurjanovic, Daniel. (Translated from German by Shaun Whiteside) “Yukinori Yanagi,” Flash Art vol. 26 no. 172 (October ’93), p. 95+.


Munroe, Alexandra. “Hinomaru Illumination/ Japanese art of the 90s,” Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky (exhibition catalogue), published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. in


Selected Bibliography by Yukinori Yanagi:


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