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A LUMINESCENT INSTSALLATION RESPONDS TO TWITTER USERS' MOOD SWINGS
Emotion Commune, Protocinema, through July 2

By Ari Akkermans

Mika Tajima, "Emotion Commune" (2016), Protocinema, Istanbul (all photos by Batu Tezyüksel)

What are the mechanisms of control that operate in society today? In the Orwellian fantasy of a dystopian world, cities are filled with surveillance cameras and robots that monitor human activities around the clock — and modern life is not too far from that. The municipality of Dubai announced two years ago the introduction of interactive patrolling bots by 2017, and the possibility of fully intelligent robots being part of the police force by 2020. But the bigger picture of mechanisms of control at the level of policy and politics may distract us from the true nature of the problem: There are microstructures that permeate the fabric of the everyday and police our lives all the time. We are living in what Michel Foucault called a "disciplinary society," one in which discipline (or organization) is a mechanism of power that regulates individual behavior by regulating the distribution of space (architecture), time (timetables) and activities (drills, posture, movements). The idea of society controlling its populace isn't new, but Foucault's contribution to the discourse was his understanding of

the structure of power that makes control possible while managing to have no structure to speak of. Foucault writes in *History of Sexuality* that "Power is everywhere: not that it engulfs everything, but that it comes from everywhere." He is making us aware that power is neither an agency nor a structure. How do power and mechanisms of control appear in the everyday?

Throughout her practice, Japanese American artist Mika Tajima, a research-based practitioner, has been concerned with the conditioning rather than the conditions of modern life — conditioning understood as unnatural and distinct from human nature — investigating the way technology-driven artifacts have served to repurpose human relations and the extent to which this kind of social engineering is identical to the configuration of our habitat. In previous projects, Tajima looked into cornerstones of American design, such as the iconic Herman Miller furniture, the transition from the cubicles to open space in corporate environments, and the curious social history of apparently innocuous innovations such as the bathtub or ergonomics. Tajima has extensively explored the extent to which ergonomics has come to understand the human condition as an operational system regulated by principles, data and methods — all of which can be manipulated.
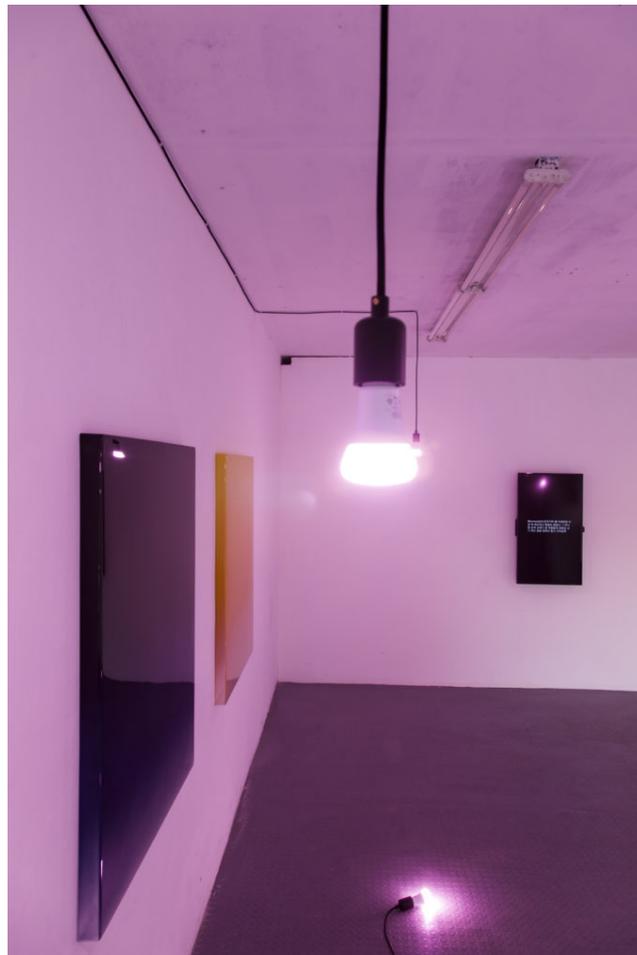

Mika Tajima, "Emotion Commune" (2016), Protocinema, Istanbul

In her most recent exhibition, *Emotion Commune*, presented by Protocinema and on view at Istanbul Textile Traders' Market, Tajima shifts the emphasis from the social critique of ergonomics toward the question of big data and the ongoing transformation of the data environment in the last decade: Data has become incorporated into the physical structure of reality. In 2015, the artist began working on "Meridian," a new series of light installations, using language-processing technology to interpret data, going from examining the way in which technological mechanisms control and condition the body to a closer look into how data produced by humans (sometimes passively) is being used for a machine-powered production of reality; something that leaves us without the last assurance of our human capacities, the need to produce our own world. The iteration of "Meridian" shown in Istanbul is cleverly conceived as an apparently simple setup of decorative lights (critically engaging with the social history of design) and consists of WiFi-enabled smart lights connecting the exhibition space to the internet of things: Using specialized software whose primary task is to detect and interpret human emotions, the technology employed uses algorithms to filter data from thousands of Twitter feeds.

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How is a project like this connected to Istanbul, though? Amid a climate of mistrust and uncertainty following the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and a long series of political scandals that have revealed the extent to which citizens are under state surveillance in Turkey, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality joined an international consortium of state and private organizations committed to integrating technology that would streamline the city's administrative bodies, leading to more effective management of crises, including civil unrest and natural disasters (a major earthquake is expected along the city's fault line in the next century). City officials seem very keen on joining the league of "smart cities": high-powered urban areas that are run on automated technology, without a visible police force, such as Singapore, Dubai, and Hong Kong — none of which are particularly democratic. This raises alarms about whether the streamlining of data poses a threat to citizens' personal safety and the possibility of dissent.

The installation's data feed does not come from Istanbul but from South Korea's New Songdo City, one of the current paradigms for a smart city. Built from scratch on 1,500 acres of reclaimed land along the waterfront of Incheon, New Songdo City is wholly private and entirely owned by real estate development firms, making it the largest private real estate development in history. The city is fully streamlined and is considered a model for future cities: According to Tajima, "The entire environment is embedded with computational technologies that provide urban management and regulation." The exhibition proposes two core questions: Is this type of city compatible with the needs of its inhabitants, and is this kind of anonymous and automated policing comparable to public administration and democratic politics? The physical reality of data begins to erode the rather invisible realm of politics, for we are all passive producers of data: While we sleep, our phones measure our heartbeats, scan our emails for keywords to direct promotional content, and streamline our contacts between different applications.

What's the difference between being an inhabitant of a city and citizen of a country and being a user of technology? The standardization of emotional responses that plagues the online world, triggered by clickbait and social media, fits in well with the neoliberal economic policy to retreat from the public space into an arena of consumerism and replace the public domain with the anonymity and isolation (or consolation) of the Internet. In Tajima's work, human emotions have become a quantifiable mass body that can travel across the space — the lights change according to the mood of the Twitter feed — so that the conditioning of the modern subject goes beyond the body, to include modifications of consciousness, in a form of mass hysteria that is paradoxically very solitary: The subjects are disenfranchised from society, but they react, rather than act, in common. For the user, the possible range of responses is very limited, whereas political subjects are contingent and completely unpredictable.

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Alongside this iteration of "Meridian," Tajima's exhibition includes a number of her signature "furniture art" pieces: transparent shells that contain blooming paint mist on their interior surfaces. These were created in reference to Erik Satie's "Furniture Music" — infinitely repetitive compositions conceived to operate merely as aural décor; the monotonous sound of globalization. There's a certain modern formalism in Tajima's work that sums up a great deal of the current global momentum through addressing processes of homogenization and standardization at every level, both of industrial production and social policy. Different places become synchronized into a viscous space where the social world is a performative reaction to the conditioning of power. Instead of falling for the old, easy nostalgia over a grand lost past, Tajima's exhibition engages with the realities of data and technology not with the caution and distance of a social scientist but with subtle artistic curiosity, unleashing our own creations on us.