

YUJI AGEMATSU

April 26–June 29, 2014

This muck heaves and palpitates. It has a mayor. It is both physical (gum and bugs) and spiritual (dust and ground down ATM cards), and part of a larger mystery Yuji Agematsu has met with since the 1980s. There is a touch of sublimity to it, as when you notice a contact lens held up by a pillow of soot. There is a rill of doom, as when you start at the burnt butts and revolve downward, the way a buzzard glides and drops in the air, until you light on a carcass and the dirtiest M&M you've ever seen. The levity of this doom has no equal.

When Agematsu moved to New York, the city he found was a great filthy gift. To him it was eden, but he doesn't want it back. Still, he laments the hike on cigarettes, and the loss of a four-story building inhabited by nothing but pigeons and mutts. Otherwise, no vales of Har for him. No rebirth either. Once is enough. He knows cities change faster than the heart. And in some ways, his work is secretary to such change. Routine change—the loss of the penny, for example. Entropy—a

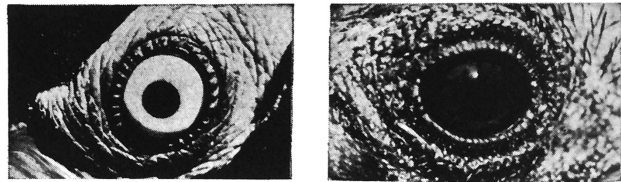


succinct definition of which we might find in Humpty Dumpty. And still less measurable change—passing apparitions, I suppose.

“The city is a machine that creates a new city, new buildings, new shit, and

each day I walk around observing and collecting it,” Agematsu has said. “There is always something to do, clean up the building, go to the bank, the eye doctor, pay the bills, always some bureaucracy I have to deal with, so while I’m out I make my work.”

In his time, Agematsu has visited and poked around in almost every one of the neighborhoods that make up New York. He has gone to some of these neighborhoods only once or twice, but he has gone to others—or to certain streets in them—over and over again, for reasons that he clearly understands, or for reasons that he dimly understands, or for reasons that he does not understand at all.



When something grips his eye he takes it to the studio to pin it down. White paint scales from the brick walls, bacteria glows, and objects shift and wander in huge piles, like dunes. Agematsu will sometimes wipe mouse droppings from

a box with his sleeve, calmly reflecting on how mice have such passion for his little things. “They’ve eaten holes in my worldview” and gnawed the round out of an Ornette Coleman record. One has chewed into a box of funny pages leaving the shape of its body in the news, and another has polished off an exhibition from the 90s. Rot has taken others. Nothing is stable. “What can be done? We must risk mortality and decay.”

Permanence is a palpable aspect of this business of art, if only because it extends a dead artist’s existence beyond the limits one envisioned, or provides a living artist with a future one cannot measure. In other words, it deals with the future which we all prefer to regard as unending. On the whole, objects are less finite than ourselves. Even the worst among them outlasts its creator. What, then, are we to make of an archive which goes in reverse, or of an exhibition which accelerates its demise? What are we to think of an art work in conflict with self-importance, including the self-importance endemic to art and preservation?

How are we to understand an artist whose work consists almost exclusively

of small acts of neglect; someone who almost always makes the same thing and yet never repeats himself, to whom his own work, honed on the tiniest details, becomes pleasantly incomprehensible and has the tendency to dissolve upon seeing it, so that only a few hours after encountering it, one can barely remember the ephemeral matter of which it was made?

I am old.
Everything is
old. The
planet is
old. & there's
no way to get
rid of all this
plastic. & we're
shooting the
shit into space.
I used to
want to
go into
space. For
what? To
see all this
garbage floating
by.

How is it, too, so much empathy and interest can be applied to the most

insignificant things? “Indeed,” Robert Walser writes about ash, “if one goes into this apparently uninteresting subject in any depth there is quite a lot to be said about it which is not at all uninteresting; if, for example, one blows on ash it displays not the least reluctance to fly off instantly in all directions. Ash is submissiveness, worthlessness, irrelevance itself, and best of all, it is itself pervaded by the belief that it is fit for nothing. Is it possible to be more helpless, more impotent, and more wretched than ash? Not very easily. Could anything be more compliant and more tolerant? Hardly. Ash has no notion of character and is further from any kind of wood than dejection is from exhilaration. Where there is ash there is actually nothing at all. Tread on ash, and you will barely notice that you have stepped on anything.”

One of life’s hardest jobs, it turns out, is to make a quick understanding slow. When we began, I was omniscient, and interested in opinion rather than creation. I had forgotten, I suppose, a terrifying thing I warn others against—measly palliatives. My slogan was, “No amount of assertion will make an ounce of art,” but I forgot it. Too much of a

temptation to get in the first critical word, I guess. Don't get me wrong, I like trying out ideas on his work, but I am suspicious of how quickly they come. For every darkened thought on capitalism, comes another in love with the way our lives are grinding the earth to a halt, or still another about the distinctions we make between what is and isn't animate. Thinking hasn't been the problem, as it so often is; the problem has been the number of thoughts one can pant after. Waste is of intensest significance. It is emblematic, in some ways, for how we invest a universal subject with pet knowledge and particular anxiety. It means and means and means, and in some hands can mean too much.

Yuji Agematsu was born in 1956 in Kanagawa, Japan. He lives in Brooklyn, NY. He studied with Tokio Hasegawa, a member of the band Taj Mahal Travellers, and the jazz drummer and choreographer Milford Graves.

TABLE WORK

(14) 2 x 6 ft. tables; (4) 2 x 4 ft. tables; (4) 2 x 2 ft. tables

These tables were arranged this April. The material from which they are composed dates from the 1990s until now. Nothing is collaged, all is presented as found and then painstakingly improvised into place.



It must be a difficult step for any artist to decide to work with trash, to take it, with all its rigid contrivances, folly, and lapses in taste, at all seriously. But Agematsu overthrows the genre with his free-wheeling conception, facility, and ingenious, almost childlike, love of contradiction. Precise and superabundant, deadly serious and ebullient, filthy and dignified, Agematsu

exposes us to these opposites, and if he wishes to make something black, to also confront beauty. He never fails to be in awe of the sense of mystery that attaches itself to the particulars of things. It is this awe and his facility that keep this work from being yet another example of de-contextualization, which received its awkward name in the late twentieth century and was a fixture of that century's visual culture. Burial masks decorate orthopedics' waiting rooms, airplane propellers on display in coffee shops—these are familiar forms of the practice of taking something from where it belongs and putting it where it doesn't belong, to be merely observed.

CIGARETTE CELLOPHANE

(4) 2 x 6 ft. tables; January, February, March, April, 2014

These bags were made between January 1 and April 27 of this year and two Januaries from now there won't be much to look at. Agematsu has been making what I call a ceremony of losses, each day, since 1997.

He began with uncertainty, in ignorance, and slowly a new form

emerged. Objects are found by chance, dropped into the cellophane without manipulation, and accompanied by an expressionistic note:

03 - 06 - 14 (Thu)
 Yonkstreet (B) Subway station
 Platform
 Pm 10:30 ~ Pm 10:50
 冷たい風の中を馬車通り。Yonkstreet
 Subway stationへと進入。
 いらんがさ。フックルリリリ...
 人の話し声。声。Platform
 地下鉄橋のむき出しの
 柱。私は、黒い紙に
 すがりついた。この地面。ここ
 に点在し落ちる。カ。カ。カ
 を拾い始める。...
 粗末な作り。何れも赤... (P. 42)
 白... (黒紙) 袋
 落ちた。そのまわりの図形
 を採取する。
 列車の音。多数
 この音。そのまわりの
 音。そのまわりの音。そのまわりの音。
 列車の音。多数

March 6, 2014 (Thursday)

York Street F subway station platform

10:39–10:50PM

I'm outside. The wind is so cold. Oh shit. The sky is black and purple. The moon is almost full. It's a totally fat moon. I run into the York St. subway station. Down, down, down. Someone's laughing. Waga Waga Waga. I'm on the platform waiting for the F train. I find a piece of dust caught between two other pieces of dust. It has white strings. I find red candies with tiny black stones. I hear people, "Go wwon, wahloon, ga dong gwodung." Sounds like they're from another country. I hear another noise, "gadong, go dong da gong go gong." Oh, train's coming.

The traces he does leave are so faint as to be effaced altogether. Sometimes he cheats and adds a little glue, but he never imposes his will. Found things, as Agematsu likes to say, are so much more bent than he could ever make them. What the city delivers is never stale. It stupefies, it awes, and finally it even embarrasses one's own meager imagination.

Odd how matter so factual can amount to such an extraterrestrial mood. It is eerie, isn't it, when what at first seems incidental returns with significance. Of course, in art we expect matter, however

mundane, to return changed, and yet, specific moments of transformation, when they do appear, can still take us by surprise. I'll never get used to the feeling of a dead thing becoming warm and capable.

PHOTOGRAPHS

(2) 2 x 6 ft. tables; (8) blown-up 35mm contact sheets

These photographs were taken with the conclusive intention of being printed as unedited contact sheets.

(2) 35mm slide carousels

These photographs were taken in Times Square between 2001 and 2004. You will find certain observations to be no longer true of the area, owing to the swing of the pendulum. But most things are just as they were.

At the time, Agematsu shot so many photographs that he was unable to keep up with the editing, gradually gave up trying to do so, and by the end, had stopped looking at—or processing—what he'd shot. The idea that we photograph to find out what something will look like photographed became, effectively, to not

bother finding out what something will look like photographed, to photograph for the sake of photographing. This is a high-stakes wager—have we so internalized what making and collecting images does to things that we no longer need to look at them?

I am tempted to count these photos a prolific chronicle of human behavior, but this gets it backward. Agematsu is an anti-sociologist. He likes the city the way Beckett liked the circus. The city is a backdrop, a stage for something else, something that goes unsuppressed, a posthumous vibe, the illogical feeling that this work was made by someone who is already dead.

CHEWING GUM

(1) 2 x 4 ft. table

“Hair, gum, and cigarettes, they're human, you know. They carry DNA. You can read them, or I can, a little. Each piece indicates some psychology of the chewer. Like down on wall street, all the gum is so tiny, so chewed down, you know, it's really hard, and then around playgrounds and Times Square you can find huge suckers, real fat pieces.”

UTILITY POLE

(1) 2 x 6 ft. table

This piece was skinned off of a utility pole on SE 11th and Morrison.

Excerpts from Gustave Doré's *Francis Rabelais' Five Books of the Lives, Heroic Deeds and Sayings of Gargantua and His Son Pantagruel*, 1854; Bern Porter's *Found Poems*, 1972; Eileen Myles' "Promotional Material," from *Not Me*, 1991.

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Curated by Robert Snowden

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1010 SE Morrison, Portland, OR
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