

MASATO TAKASAKA NEVER-ENDISM

Helen Hughes



'... you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.'

This phrase concludes Samuel Beckett's play *The Unnamable* (1954) and also commences co-curators Henriette Huldish and Shamim M. Momin's catalogue essay for the 2008 Whitney Biennial that pivots around a theme of 'lessness'. Beckett's famous anti-ending characterises a pervasive feeling underpinning the creation of much art today: 'the inevitability of going on in the face of absurdity, as well as the lack of anywhere to go'.¹ In its circuitry, the phrase 'I can't go on, I'll go on' conjures up an image of a feedback loop in contemporary art production where everything appears to have already been done (twice).² This notion of endgame or endism underscores the art of Masato Takasaka and his dialogue with Australian postmodern appropriation theory nearly thirty years after its inception. Yet, as with his treatment of modernist visual languages such as geometric abstraction, and in line with his interest in improvisational and progressive rock music, Takasaka's art comes at these ideas from an oblique angle. His work concurrently engages with and distances itself from the rhetoric of repetition and appropriation with a wry sense of humour and, often, a comic self-reflexivity. In a statement that rivals Beckett in its circuitous nature, Takasaka has said that 'art needs art to make art'.³ So, by perpetually recycling texts and images assembled from a diverse array of sources to create new work, Takasaka both continues the lineage of and represents a rupture in the history of Australian appropriation art.

An organised effort was made in Australia in the early 1980s to align notions of endism in creativity and inspiration (the rise of appropriation) with a national movement in contemporary art. Paul Taylor, a vocal spearhead of the movement, suggested that contemporary artists who engaged with endism and appropriation were not merely being derivative, but new and creative in the way that disco music — which combines the old with the new — is new and creative. Taylor wrote: 'Disco's *modus operandi* is repetition within the fertile space of the cover version, the re-staging of an original in terms of a specific use-value (dance).'⁴ Takasaka's repeated use of the copy or visual quote combined with his interest in shredding-along to improv and prog rock guitar music could ostensibly situate him within this category, as Takasaka openly revels in this realm of the cover version. Certainly in the past, commentators such as Justin Andrews, Lisa Radford and Damiano Bertoli have taken Takasaka's (normally) extra-artistic interest in lead guitar as one of the central points of discussion for his visual art practice — most recently with Bertoli comparing Takasaka's visual art to his musical taste by assimilating the role of the 'session muso' (whose profession is to play the songs of others, 'with signature inserted') with that of the artist.⁵ These ideas — of endism in art and endism in music — might lead one to presume that Takasaka's *modus operandi* is repetition within the fertile space of the sprawling guitar solo. But Takasaka's art does not typically constitute the 're-staging of an original'. Rather, his practice pivots around the recycling of a readymade contextualised object in terms of a specific use-value that is progression. That is to say, where earlier generation appropriation artists like Juan Davila or Imants Tillers copied aspects of existing artworks to create new hybrid works which questioned the perimeters of originality, Takasaka treats the entire framework of a given artwork as the readymade that can be used to infinitely expand those boundaries through a recycling or reiteration of material and concept.

Takasaka's most recent exhibition, *Post-structural Jam (Shut up! We know you can play!...)* held at Y3K represents the most extreme manifestation of this 'readymade appropriation' in his practice to date. For *Post-structural Jam*, Takasaka employed a method of production that he described as 'readymade collage': he picked pages from assorted guitar magazines and directly appropriated their pre-existing layouts or 'automatic structures' (as well as their inherent multiplicity of authors), blew them up to AO poster size, and mounted them on the gallery wall.⁶ This is what Takasaka describes as 'reverse' or 'degree zero collage'.⁷ But the processes of recycling and appropriation did not cease there. For this exhibition, Takasaka recycled everything down to the title, which riffed on the name of his exhibition at The Narrows in 2007 (*Structural Jam: It's All Lead Guitar When Prog Rock Ruled The Earth*) and was synthesised with a comment from Lisa Radford's accompanying catalogue essay. Perhaps the difference between earlier generations of Australian appropriation artists and Takasaka, then, lies in the circuitousness that stems from his constant reusing and rearranging of ideas and materials. Takasaka's engagement with appropriation is not a direct quote; it is a distanced conceptual and physical

sure of what you were going to do as a career?

It was completely taken with it — gobsmacked! I think what's it all worthwhile is when you learn your first song, and mine was *Savage* by the Shadows. I think it was on the flipside of *FBI*. So I did this riff, and when I got from one end of it to the other it sounded to me that if you can learn one song, you can learn two, and ...

It's always a major discovery — halfway through one song you realise you've got the chords for another...

...same chords, different order, or make that major into a minor. It never occurred to me until I joined Victor and his Blues Train, most of, say, Elvis' and Little Richard's music had come from the

...; I didn't even know what the blues was in 1963! Victor was really taken with it — Leadbelly, Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters — I'd never heard of any of them, most of these records didn't even have a bass on them anyway. So I started playing these numbers and he'd be putting down a bass line for me, or less by instinct, and that was my induction into the blues. I never mind the blues though...

...I really wanted to do was join the Hollies when I was seventeen! I got into the circle at that time, and I'm still there for some time.

...If there, and still using the Precision — obviously the bass as far as you're concerned...

...That's the one, sure. I did have a Precision for a while, and I really liked it, but the trouble was that because I'd worn a Precision for so long, Wal didn't really 'fit'. So I decided it was easier just to keep playing the Precision.

...Believe you're scheduled to start doing the follow-up to 'Still Got Blues' very soon. How did the Precision come about for the original project?

...Quite straightforward, really. Victor phoned me one day and said, 'I want to do a blues album, will you help me put it together?' There was no idea of what songs to do at that point, just the idea itself, so I went over to Gary's place one day, and he had at down with a small personal order in his front room and he showed me the sort of material he was thinking of doing.

...Of course it was second nature to me because it was what I'd done

ST MAY 1991

together before; we've been friends for years anyway. In 1960 Gary phoned me and said, 'I want to do a blues album, will you help me put it together?' That was more heavy rock, plus stuff like *Parishienne Walkways*, but Gary was just touching on his heavy metal period then. After we did that album he went off to make his name with heavy metal. He must be delighted that a subject so close to his heart has now taken precedence in his career...

Well, heavy metal is the blues, really. Led Zeppelin started all that by taking blues songs a bit further, doing them in that heavy style. And that opened up a new direction for bands to follow...

The opportunity to work with the Alberts must have been exciting. Tired, for instance, suggests that you were all having a good time. There

Photo: Paul Natkin

Vernon uses XL115s live and on Living Colour's latest album, "Time's Up".

Vernon

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recycling of the original that is largely removed from the earlier and more popular notion of pastiche.

In this way, a possible point of comparison for Takasaka's treatment of appropriation can be found in the work of Arlo Mountford, whose digital animations similarly treat the contextualised artwork as readymade. Take, for example, Mountford's animation *The Pioneer Meets the Wanderer* (2006), in which two stick-figure characters lie on a sunny beach while assorted icons of modernism wash-up on the shore (the first of which is, suitably, the most iconic of all readymades: Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913). Following this seaside interchange, the two figures stroll past a series of paintings — including one by Tillers — then through Heide Museum of Modern Art, where they encounter further artworks hung *in situ*. Like Takasaka's readymade collages for *Post-structural Jam*, Mountford's stick-figure characters inhabit the already-curated space of the two-dimensional museum. We are no longer viewing the appropriation of an original artwork as readymade, but rather the appropriation of the original context as readymade. And in this appropriation of context — this distancing through copying — we are liberated from the original, tailored (readymade) experience of the museum and are offered a new point of entry into the perception of art history.

If modernism was a reflection of life, and postmodernism a mirror held up to this reflection, then viewing Takasaka's work feels at times like the equivalent of entering a third mirror into this equation: a reflection of a reflection of a reflection. (Never-endism?) With this in mind, then, perhaps it is not that Takasaka is applying or resuscitating ideas related to postmodern appropriation, but rather that he is appropriating appropriation theory itself. Radford summed this up best in 2007 when

she wrote in an email to Takasaka (that would later become the catalogue essay for his show at The Narrows) that: 'Your drawings look like you're a fan of modernism, but maybe not a diehard fan.'³⁸ Radford's comment identifies a level of detachment on the part of Takasaka — a distancing and expansion through visual quotation that stems from copying the copy, or appropriating the appropriation.

Perhaps most significantly, Takasaka repeats or copies images, ideas and text from his own visual and written repertoires. He frequently recycles phrases from emails, materials from previous sculptures and compositions from existing drawings when creating new work. One physical by-product of this compulsive and self-reflexive recycling is the sense of a constantly evolving, organic retrospective gesture in Takasaka's art: a surreal synthesis of time through the material distillation of past and present. Take, for example, the repeated use of perforated white chipboard with blue polka dots that featured firstly in *Window Shopping* at Penthouse and Pavement in 2000; then *Productopia* at 1st Floor Artists and Writers Space in 2001; *Structural Jam* at The Narrows in 2007; *I Like My Old Stuff Better Than Your New Stuff* at Ocular Lab also in 2007; and *The (self-initiated, self-funded) second (fourth) Y2K Melbourne Biennial of Art (& design)* at TCB art inc. in 2008. Takasaka also constantly recycles text: his own (I'm thinking of his mind-blowingly circular, stream-of-consciousness catalogue essay for Mountford's exhibition *The Hacienda Must be Built* held at The Art Center, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok in 2009) as well as the text of others (consider the reconstitution of Radford's email-cum-catalogue essay-cum-*unMagazine* 3.1 artist text-cum exhibition title). What actually occurs in the process of Takasaka's self-referential recycling is not the visualisation of a feedback loop, but rather of a snowball effect. His work does not appear to

articulate the failure of originality after modernism — as, perhaps, Taylor and the appropriation artists in Australia of the 1980s and 1990s intimated — but the infectiousness of progress, even in the 'face of absurdity as well as a lack of anywhere to go' in the post(post?)modern world.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 1 Henriette Huldich, 'Lessness: Samuel Beckett in Echo Park, or an Art of Smaller, Slower, and Less' in Henriette Huldich and Shamim M. Momin (eds.), *2008 Biennial Exhibition*, New York, Whitney Museum of American Art: 2008, p. 37.
- 2 2 Ibid.
- 3 3 Artist statement, 2007, cited in Justin Andrews, 'Arranging Instead of Making', 2007 available at www.justin-andrews.info/html/masato_takasaka_review.html.
- 4 4 Paul Taylor, 'Popism — the Art of White Aborigines', *On the Beach*, Vol. 1, 1982, reproduced in Rex Butler, *What Is Appropriation? An Anthology of Writings on Australian Art in the 1980s and 1990s*, Sydney, Institute of Modern Art: 1996, p. 86.
- 5 5 Damiano Bertoli, *Post-structural Jam (Shut Up! We Know You Can Play!...)*, (catalogue essay), Y3K, Melbourne, 2009, unpaginated.
- 6 6 Ibid.
- 7 7 Artist statement, 2009.
- 8 8 Lisa Radford, *Structural Jam: It's All Lead Guitar*
- 7 *When Prog Rock Ruled*, (catalogue essay), The
- 8 Narrows, Melbourne, 2007, unpaginated.