

Tomoko Takahashi

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Tomoko Takahashi, untitled installation, Beaconsfield, Vauxhall, 1997

In a tall, darkened room, screens flicker and mechanical noises—a slide projector, a tape recorder—louder and softer, strike up a rhythm. A bewildering mass of junk is laid out across the floor, selectively lit by old desk-lamps (relatives of the other detritus) and ordered by some obscure logic. Surveying this field of semi-functional trash, the scale begins to waver. Are the lines marked out on the floor, dividing collections of objects into subsections and connecting them, the representation of circuit board connections or road markings? Are we looking at some baroque, bricolaged microchip, its wiring as tangled as brambles, or an industrial estate, disposed over gently sloping land, at night?

Tomoko Takahashi has made such installations before, generally working with what was available in a particular place—one of her most compelling works was staged in an advertising office—transforming the waste produced by people’s work into frenetic three-dimensional collages.¹ The impression is always chaotic, in the sense that some natural force has apparently been at work, arranging things in an order that, like fractal images, is simple in its determinants but highly complex in its visual form.

In the upper space at Beaconsfield, though, things are a little different because Takahashi has chosen to play down the character of the building. The windows have been blocked out and the space of the old schoolroom has all but disappeared, except where storage cupboards have been opened and brightly lit, spewing out their contents. The objects displayed have no obvious connection with the space—now a gallery, after all—and this is very much a moveable and saleable installation.

Even so, Takahashi’s activity has remained the same. Her work always seems to be in the throes of becoming—one old telephone facia in the display, with half its buttons missing, carries a single word on it, spelt out in capitals: ‘process’. The artist’s arduous, lengthy labour is at the forefront of each display. At Beaconsfield, the work has a melancholy air: if seen as buildings, the junk becomes ruins; if circuitry, it is obsolete. Some of the machines continue to turn over regardless of human presence, like those automated factories which operate in the dark. The relative stillness and desolation of the installation is at odds with the frenzy of effort which created it, that labour frozen in the array of ex-consumer-objects.

The viewer’s attention here is like that of a rag-picker, directed downwards, trying to draw sense and use from a display of dysfunction. The extraordinary variety of detritus which Takahashi has assembled is itself a reminder of the machine of the capitalist economy, throwing up whole genres of broom handles, for example, which can be laid out in taxonomic order—likewise keyboards, screens, clocks, bottles. When new, in all of them human labour is embodied and invisible. The more they become useless, the more the contingency of these objects condenses—their surfaces speak of character and history, and begin to tell the stories of their origin and use.

¹ The advertising office installation was called *Company Deal* and was seen in Battersea in 1997.

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Tomoko Takahashi, *Drawing for Beaconsfield*, 1997

In her labour, Takahashi plays the role of the demon of Capital—a machine running without regard for people—laying out, ranking, discarding objects. Like that demon, her work aspires to the transformation of every single thing—in her separate installation in Beaconsfield's lower space, a collection of photographs of small bits of the gallery floor and walls is self-mockingly inscribed 'things I missed out'.² Yet she does so, not to dispose of these prematurely aged objects (and the work which inheres in them) but to rescue them, giving them a new, pallid life in an order which is aesthetic, not economic. And, if these works have a power, it is because those two realms are more intimately linked than most art works like to claim, or most artists dare to admit.

² In the lower space, Takahashi has made an installation in collaboration with the musician Neill Quinton who has written a score in tandem with her plans for the space.