

Inhabiting the Grid: Kazuko Miyamoto's Counter-Cartographies

*I, who am only an incomprehensible
Bit of scribble
On some warehouse wall
Or some subway entrance.
Matchstick figure,
Heart pierced by arrow,
Scratch of a meter maid
On a parked hearse.
CRAZY CHARLIE in red spray paint
Crowding for warmth
With other unknown divinities
In an underpass at night.
Tattooed City
(by Charles Simić)*

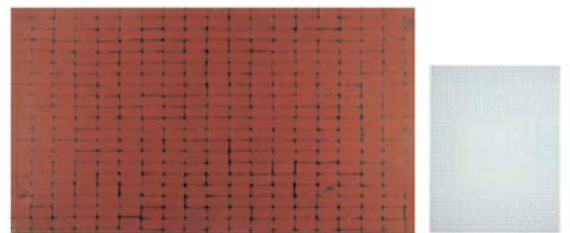
The city seeps out in the details that tell about it. Peeled walls layered with spray paint. Shop signs, posters, neon. Yellow streetlamps, blinking traffic lights. Taxis, cars, people crossing, spilling onto the sidewalks. Tracks, lanes. Fire escapes. Squatted apartments, basements. Vacant lots, a ghost silence. Broken windows, patched with tarps. New York, the 1970s: the fiscal crisis and deindustrialization remake the city from within.

Factories close, buildings are abandoned, whole working-class neighborhoods absorb the fallout of disinvestment and urban-renewal policy. Writers and artists give this changing landscape back to us, leaving behind permanent testaments. Surface traces, for instance, are what Gordon Matta-Clark captures: in *Wall Paper* (1972) he photographs the interior walls of half-demolished tenements in the Bronx and in the Lower East Side, recording their skin—their scars, their pores, their fine weave. Interiors and architectural fragments laid bare like the anatomy of a gutted creature, one beast in a larger bestiary—the city. New York and its buildings, New York and its people, the ones Vito Acconci shadows in *Following Piece* (1969), where he tails passersby chosen at random until they disappear into private space. Bodies in plain sight, and yet unacknowledged: Adrian Piper, her mouth stopped, her words blocked, riding a bus in the *Catalysis* series (1970–71). Urban geographies, human geographies. A field of tensions, a place of relations and exclusion.

Kazuko Miyamoto lives in the Lower East Side, at 117 Hester Street, and it is 1969 when she makes the triptych *Progression of Rectangles*. Across it she traces a rigid cage of orthogonal lines that the eye reads as a brick wall, calling to mind the reddish, soot-blackened façades of the tenements that since the late nineteenth century had taken in those arriving from abroad, one wave after another. Although the work can be traced to an inquiry into seriality and the early articulation of a minimalist grammar—all the



Left: Gordon Matta-Clark, *Wall Paper*, 1972; right: Adrian Piper, *Catalysis IV*, 1970. Photo: Rosemary Mayer



Left: *Progression of Rectangles* (2/3), 1969; right: *Laugh*, 1973

more so since it is precisely in 1969 that Miyamoto begins working with Sol LeWitt—the triptych offers a vivid rendering of a material surface, tactile to the eye. This weave of lines returns, too, in the graph paper and ledger sheets she chooses for her drawings. What the artist dwells on, first, are the interstices, the grid, which in its simple, primordial structure recalls woven cloth, that inseparable marriage of warp and weft.

In a small work on paper, *Laugh* (1973), Miyamoto writes the word “laugh” repeatedly in cursive. The repetition recalls the drill of someone learning to write—in their own language or in a new tongue—but also the attempt to explore the word’s many shades of meaning. Unchanged and invariable across I, we, you, and they, the verb “laugh” holds, in its apparent plainness, a relational dimension. A laugh that speaks of the self and of the other. “The grid,” Rosalind Krauss writes in her celebrated essay “Grids” (October, 1979), “is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature”—describing modernism’s drive toward the autonomy of form. With the subtle irreverence and playfulness that are her signature, Miyamoto breathes a recovered vitality back into the minimalist cage. Yet a precise visual trace of the bond between warp and weft remains, instead, in *Book of Holes* (1974)—a small squared notebook in which every corner is pricked with a needle. A gentle piercing, a more hushed gesture when compared to the sharp one of a nail beaten with a hammer in her iconic string constructions.



Book of Holes, 1974 and its detail

In 1980 Miyamoto presents her solo show *Nesting* at the A.I.R. Gallery, where a new body of work comes together, made from organic materials—twigs, cord, and rolled packing paper. What greets the visitor is the site-specific *Black Screen* (1980), conceived as a diaphragm, a piece that marks the passage from the string constructions of the 1970s to the sculptures of the 1980s, built from elements gathered in the natural world. Although no images of this work are known to survive, a detailed description appears in the review Elizabeth Frank publishes in *Art in America* in February 1981: “The entrance to the show was marked by Black Screen [...], a grid painted black, which clearly established a transition between the minimalist austerity of her earlier grid-and-lattice works and the abundant naturalism of the new works in the installation.” Here the grid takes on an architectural, walkable dimension, becoming a threshold that ushers the visitor into Miyamoto’s renewed imaginative world—full of great nests to nestle in and long suspended bridges to cross.

The grid that runs through all of Miyamoto’s work lives by a continual tension. Jazz improvisation exceeds any excessively rigid form. It demands dilation, lengthening, a willingness to be deformed. The threads follow diagonal paths, knotting unexpected connections. From the 1980s on, though, it grows in a

more discreet sense, resurfacing as a hushed presence. Such is the case with *Stunt* (181 Chrystie Street, 1981), born of a photograph taken by Fumiko Hasegawa, a guest of the artist in her Chrystie Street loft. It shows Miyamoto naked, upside down, her face hidden behind a mask; behind her, two open-cube structures by Sol LeWitt. As in the euphoria of Carnival, the established order is suspended and the world turns upside down—and not by coincidence right before LeWitt’s minimalist lattice, onto which Miyamoto grafts the same irony that already animated *Laugh* (1973). From the black-and-white photograph, the artist develops the work in xerographic enlargements, recomposing the shot into an orthogonal array of forty-four photocopies set side by side (a smaller version is also known, a three-photocopy collage dated 1982).



Left: Albrecht Dürer, illustration from *Underweysung der Messung mit dem Zirckel und Richtscheit*, Nuremberg, 1525; right: *Stunt* (181 Chrystie Street, 1981), 1982

Her gaze filters reality as through a veil—the veil that Leon Battista Alberti called *interseguazione*, the intersection of the visual pyramid. As one looks through a loose mesh of very fine threads, crossed by thicker threads that mark it into regular squares and stretch it out like cloth on a loom, so Miyamoto looks through the reticulated scheme, which in her hands turns from an instrument of measure into a structure of revelation. The grid, closer now to a musical staff, takes in events and records their variations, their pauses, their dissonances.

The photocopy has the grain of the Lower East Side: saturated blacks, absolute whites, grainy midtones, edges worn away by the machine. Torn, overlapping posters, stapled zines, sheets passed from hand to hand. From the 1970s on, print media—xerographic and silkscreen reproduction—become the way art bypasses the market to say what the system would rather leave unsaid. An art that leaves the gallery and takes to the streets, one of the chief instruments of a culture of opposition, as Lucy Lippard writes in *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change*, published in 1984.

For Miyamoto, the photocopy is a choice. It costs little, it can be made anywhere, it allows for repetition. But above all it is a gesture of belonging, one that embraces the aesthetic of the place—a place the artist now calls home. Self-run spaces and social clubs proliferate in the neighborhood—ABC No Rio, No Se No. On Rivington Street, in a vacant lot at the corner of Forsyth Street, the artists of the Rivington School weld scrap and salvaged materials into open-air sculptures. Miyamoto, too, steps into this scene. A single frame survives, taken by her friend the photographer Toyo Tsuchiya, in which one of her bridges of twigs and rope is strung between two buildings. In 1986, Miyamoto opens the alternative art space *Gallery Onetwentyeight*, at 128 Rivington Street, open to everyone, which soon becomes a hub for young international artists—though Sol LeWitt and David Hammons pass through it as well.



Left: *Bridges*, 1985, Rivington School Sculpture Garden, New York. Photo: Toyo Tsuchiya; right: Kazuko Miyamoto in front of *Gallery Onetwentyeight*, New York, 1986

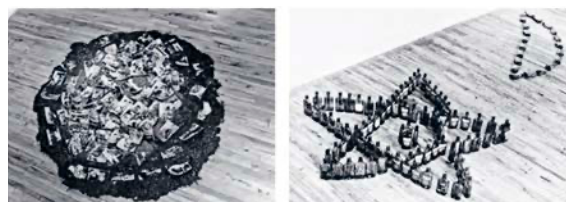
The photographs Miyamoto takes over the span of a decade are among the materials she rethinks, manipulates, and colors, seated at the table in her loft. The subjects the artist favors are the people she often meets in the neighborhood, the ones she exchanges a few words with. She leaves the house three times a day with her two Irish setters, sometimes joined by friends like the photographer Tommy Flynn, and day by day that drives her to gather these pictures is, first, a sense of community—herself among others, portraits, views of the neighborhood, bodies in the dark of night. A way of rewriting the territory, of wresting it from the dominant narrative that reduces it to a zone of abandonment. It is 1983 when Miyamoto makes *Waiting for Carnival*, a photographic series that has her walk the city's streets from the A.I.R. Gallery to Franklin Furnace, dressed in the clothes of a homeless person. The disguise is the device that makes identification possible—the act by which the artist experiences invisibility in the first person.

Four young window washers in the foreground, Delancey Street behind them—the image first appears in a 1983 installation, *Windex People*, shown in the exhibition *Tales of a Mid-Summer Moon* at the A.I.R. Gallery (September 6–24, 1983). In the work, the artist lays the portrait on a mound of earth, together with the series of black-and-white photographs showing the men caught at the roadside or up close as they clean windshields, or as they look straight into the lens, and on it she stacks a few now-empty cans of Windex. The same happens in the installation *Thunderbird Star* (1983), made of Thunderbird bottles—one of the cheapest wines—shaped into a great star and a moon, a glass firmament dedicated to those who sleep on the benches of Sara D. Roosevelt Park. In these nocturnal tales Miyamoto recognizes the characters of a story in which comedy and drama run along the same thread, each the keeper of the other's seed. Subaltern lives surface, withheld from the public gaze, misread or relegated to the margins of the collective imagination.

In the photograph *Lower East Side by Night* (1983), taken by Tommy Flynn at Miyamoto's suggestion, two women of the Bowery linger at the corner of Forsyth and Grand, wrapped in the dark. The shot, too, passes through the artist's veil, which divides it, then recomposes it, grainy and supersaturated, into a mosaic of fragments, which becomes *Untitled (Lower East Side by Night)*, 1982–88. To the same series belongs *Untitled (Four Car Window Washers on Delancey)* (1982–88), in which those figures reappear. Over the photographic base the artist intervenes with pastels and colored pencils, introducing a palette suspended between hallucination and fairy tale, run through with vivid tones that transfigure the scene. The mark seems to proceed through successive layering and suggests a plurality of hands—perhaps even that of a child, such as her son Eizan, little at the time, or the contribution of friends invited to color alongside her.



Left: Kazuko Miyamoto dancing with a group of passersby in the street of New York City, 1980s; center: the artist with a homeless person in Sara D. Roosevelt Park, 1980s; right: *Lower East Side by Night*, 1983. Concept by Kazuko Miyamoto. Photo: Tommy Flynn



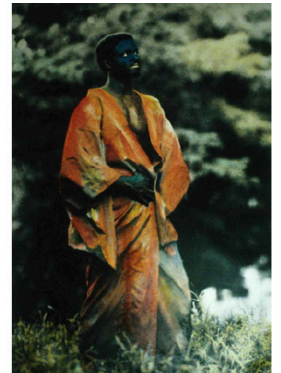
Left: *Windex People*, 1983; right: *Thunderbird Star*, 1983, installation views, *Tales of a Mid-Summer Moon*, A.I.R. Gallery, 1983



Untitled (Four Car Window Washers on Delancey), 1982–88. Two renderings for *Black and White Painting*, 1988 [written in Chinese on the lower right corner is “On busy days/the window washers”]

The sedimentation of the manual gesture runs across the weave of the image, expanding beyond the edges of the collage's individual modules and letting the halftone screen of the photocopy show through. In the lower right corner Miyamoto notes in yellow the words "Arabian Nights," followed by a proper name in Arabic characters, transliterated as "Hassan Leid" (the reading of the characters nonetheless remains uncertain, and the name has found no correspondence in research to date). A few years later it is this very photograph that resurfaces in a new project conceived for Public Art in Chinatown in 1988. Titled *Black and White Painting, Four Car Window Washers on Delancey* (1988), the proposal called for a mural on the northern brick wall facing Sara D. Roosevelt Park, between Broome Street, Forsyth Street, and Chrystie Street. "I propose that this abandoned building become a neighborhood museum," the artist writes. The portrait of the four men thus passes from paper into urban space, transforming a disused wall into a site of representation and shared memory.

It is with *Untitled (Fred Brown in Tompkins Square Park)* (1982–88) that the kimono makes one of its first entrances into her work. Portrayed at the center is her friend Fred Brown, wrapped in a red kimono—probably lent by Miyamoto—in the declamatory pose of an actor. The photograph from which the work departs belongs to a larger series, made in 1982, in which Brown spreads his arms or strikes other poses in Tompkins Square Park. In that gesture a development is announced, one destined to mature over the following decade, when Miyamoto herself will wear the kimono in most of the performances she stages throughout the 1990s. Coeval with the introduction of the kimono as symbol is the choice of fabric—cotton and gauze—as a geometric matter that vibrates. Onto these thin cloths Miyamoto impresses photographic motifs by two do-it-yourself methods, heat transfer with a clothes iron and photosensitive silkscreen. Of the heat-transfer technique the artist notes in a letter of April 8, 1987 to Peter Baum, director of the Neue Galerie in Linz, ahead of her solo exhibition there later that year—a show that, alongside the kimonos (not only of cloth but also of twigs and rolled paper), included gauzes hung from the ceiling, once again a veil interposed before the gaze. She writes: "I will print photographic images on gauzy fabric using the method of heat transfer (available in N.Y.C.) and silkscreen. These images are photographed in Linz, Kyoto (Japan), and NYC, depicting life in each city. The fabric will be made into Kimono-like robes and will hang over sculptures which are made of tree branches and paper rope resembling human figures." The fabric that receives the prints, having become a garment, falls back onto the body and embraces it. It is here that a clash arises between habitus and habitat—between the garment and the body that wears it, on one side, and the surrounding environment, on the other—and from this friction the contingent dimension emerges.



Left: *Man in Red Kimono*, 1985–86; right: *Men In Red Kimono*, 1991

In her xerographic enlargements, among the seams along which the sheets fuse, there is room for the window washers of Delancey, the women of the Bowery, those who spend the night on the benches of Sara D. Roosevelt Park, and the artist herself, portrayed in exposed nakedness. Like maps ordered by parallels and meridians, these views render the neighborhood in a single glance; yet where the map looks down from above, Miyamoto stays at street level, among the bodies. Day after day she traces her counter-cartography, and here the grid, at last, turns from an instrument of systemic synthesis into a dwelling, a woven nest that takes them all in.

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