

**Yokohama Triennale 2014**  
Yokohama Museum of Art  
and Shinko Pier Exhibition Hall,  
Yokohama, Japan  
August 1 – November 3, 2014  
by Shinobu Akimoto

I read somewhere that the contemporary art fair now stands shoulder to shoulder with “B-grade gourmet” as a municipal strategy to attract visitors and economic revitalization. (Imagine, the Montreal Biennale competing with poutine.) Predating them all, the Yokohama Triennale opened its fifth edition this summer with a hint of attitude. Titled *ART Fabrenbeit 451: Sailing into the sea of oblivion*, it showcased the work of 65 artists or groups, one-third of whom are no longer alive. This year’s Artistic Director, Yasumasa Morimura, an internationally acclaimed artist himself, brought these artists together on the premise that they are all essential contributors to any comprehensive discussion about our own contemporary times.

The theme of the Triennale gave a nod to Ray Bradbury’s 1953 science-fiction novel about a dystopian future society maintained through information and mind control, a heavy-handed theme that resonated auspiciously with the current socio-political sentiments of the host country.<sup>1</sup> While my interpretation may be a little biased, as a concerned citizen of Japan, Morimura’s response to a wider global phenomenon of instant oblivion in the shadow of “the latest” information felt both personal and prevalent throughout

his direction and involvement with the Triennale. Occupying two separate venues – the Yokohama Museum of Art and Shinko Pier Exhibition Hall – the exhibition was imagined as a “literary voyage into the sea of oblivion” divided into 11 “chapters (episodes),” whereby viewers “sailed” through to revisit things lost, failed and forgotten, or to uncover the hidden and unseen. Morimura wrote all the episodes and descriptions of the work, which he himself narrated in the audio guide.

The exhibition combined historical, conceptual and conventional object-based pieces, as well as some experimental endeavours. My tour began with warm re-encounters with long-lost influential pieces such as John Cage’s *4’33”* (1952, the original score by David Tudor) or Marcel Broodthaers’ witty audio piece *Interview with a cat* (1970). As I moved through it, I was stopped by a private collection of literature<sup>2</sup> published by respected Japanese authors and poets during World War II, now considered questionable propaganda, which Morimura described as having been “swept along and forgotten by the tide of history.” Encountering Temporary Foundation’s *Constellations and Constitutions: Turn Coat / Turn Court* (2014), a large-scale installation constructed in a rotunda resembling the Japanese Supreme Court, I entered into a “red court of law,” which suddenly turned into a “green tennis court” and then into “blue prison cells” – all simple, yet out-of-scale “models” with mirrors expanding each space. This work is based on the “Court” series originally conceived by Goh Hayashi and Hiroko Nakatsuka between 1983 and 1985, which explored the relationship between language and consciousness. The author of this new version, however, remained anonymous or “impersonal,” claiming that they intended neither to recreate the original work nor to consult with the artists concerning the project’s new life. Over the course of the exhibition, this apparatus hosted five “cases” entitled the Yokohama Trials, presided over by



Yasumasa Morimura,  
*Moe Nai Ko To Ba*, 2014  
PHOTO: KEN KATO; IMAGE COURTESY  
OF THE YOKOHAMA TRIENNALE

- 1 Amidst Japan's on-going struggle with post-disaster chaos, the Japanese cabinet has pursued a controversial political agenda this year. Starting with the contentious Special Secrecy Law, it recently approved "re-interpretation" of Japan's most symbolic pacifist constitution, consequently prompting a series of massive protests that are rather uncharacteristic of the Japanese.
- 2 Otani Yoshihisa Collection
- 3 All the "cases" will be archived at [www.temporaryfoundation.com/english/index.html](http://www.temporaryfoundation.com/english/index.html)
- 4 Dutch/American artist Bas Jan Ader disappeared in 1975 while attempting to cross the Atlantic in a 12-foot sailboat, supposedly as an artistic endeavour.
- 5 Hiragana is one of the two Japanese phonetic syllabaries used in conjunction with Kanji (Japanese-adopted Chinese Characters). Children learn Hiragana before tackling the nearly 2,000 Kanji characters used in compulsory schooling.

individuals from different fields, including music, science, philosophy and literature. Eleven "jurors" selected via open calls and 20 gallery visitors serving as "court witnesses" were locked in for two hours during each trial, while DJs and rappers "performed" the Japanese Constitution.<sup>3</sup>

*Moe Nai Ko To Ba* (2014) (translated as "words that won't burn") was an oversized book exclusively bound for the exhibition. It compiled eight texts and artworks from various times and countries, including Morimura's own work, all of which in some way relate to the themes of oblivion, extinction and censorship. Displayed on an elevated plinth for visitors to browse, this "only book in the world" was an exhibition within an exhibition, accompanied by occasional, multi-lingual reading performances. Morimura assured everyone that the book would be ceremonially burned at the end of the Triennale and would thus disappear into the oblivion, just like the other unwanted artworks thrown out by well-known artists and the general public that piled up each day in the centre of the museum as part of Michael Landy's seven-metre-high *Art Bin*.

Several chapters of *Moe Nai Ko To Ba* reflected Morimura's empathy towards fellow misfits who quietly engage in apparently futile or worthless acts of art-making on the periphery of society. While a number of Japanese contemporaries unknown to most of the foreign audience highlighted this in fascinatingly nerdy "Japanese" ways, a bonus for me was the chance to watch a selection of Bas Jan Ader's short films documenting his hapless performance from his *Fall* series (1971). Who could have been more fitting to a "voyage into the sea of oblivion" than him?<sup>4</sup>

During the press conference for the Triennale, Morimura was questioned about how he balanced his reservations about the populism of art fairs and his mandate to draw a big crowd. He responded that his

aim was to make the exhibition as open and as welcoming as possible, in order to show the public – and particularly younger generations – how non-mainstream, nonsensical or useless endeavours could serve critical and important roles in life and society. His initiatives to this end included training junior high and high school students as docents to specifically guide elementary school children and producing an exhibition catalogue for children written entirely using a Japanese phonetic character called Hiragana.<sup>5</sup> Morimura's agenda and his efforts, which could be readily criticized as idealism or the naïveté of an "artist-director," will be on trial when the final attendance figures are calculated. This verdict may send other biennales back to the formula of curating blockbuster Japanese names and other reputable regulars who make "relational" work that involves local communities. Or perhaps, this sprawling, yet personal exhibition – an artwork in its own right – will open up a new dialogue around contemporary Japanese art so that large-eyed cuties and pop anime-like figures might no longer be the only representations to spring to mind when one thinks about Japan.

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Michael Landy, *Art Bin*, 2010/2014  
 PHOTO: YUICHIRO TANAKA; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE YOKOHAMA TRIENNALE