

Performing the Institution: ICA Philadelphia's Trevor Shimizu: Performance Artist at Kunsthalte Lissabon

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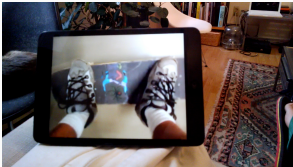


By Emily Laffer

What is an institution? Is it a building, a budget, a mission statement? These are the questions that [ICA Philadelphia](#) an initiative by the Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia, has been trying to answer. The project's latest endeavor entails an international exchange between art institutions. For the next few months, the ICA Philadelphia will be exhibiting *Kunsthalte Lissabon*, Portugal, and in 2020, it will be hosting the *Museu Nacional* Company from Portugal. These exchanges are something of an experiment to an institution geographically handicapped? Can you take it "on the road"? I had the opportunity to speak with ICA's Director and Stephen B. Walker (DFAI) and Corina Alca Kien about the ICA Philadelphia exhibition *Trevor Shimizu: Performance Artist*, which opens at Kunsthalte Lissabon, Portugal on November 20, 2019, and runs through February 1, 2020. In our conversation, we discussed the multimedia artist's engagement with video in our media saturated world and what it might mean to show this work in an international context.

Kien walked me through the checklist of *Trevor Shimizu: Performance Artist*, providing a virtual tour of the exhibition that, alas, I will never see in person (unless one of you wants to send me to Portugal). However, we can take heart in the fact that several of Shimizu's videos will be streaming on the ICA Philadelphia's website during the exhibition. This access provides another mode in the international display of this Shimizu's digital video and another point at which to consider what constitutes an institution. Is an institution a website? The curator's willingness and the venue are certainly practices that help to build an institution, especially considering the institution's institutions and establishing an audience. Kien's description emphasized Shimizu's formal experimentation, his engagement with previous art traditions, and his intense involvement with contemporary culture. In my opinion, this combination of museum research with the timeliness of a gallery is particular to the Institute of Contemporary Art model. Furthermore, it is not only the exhibition or the curator that establishes an institution, but also its reception. Thus this article itself is true, otherwise it is, and where it is published also contributes to the construction of the art institution. This very movement itself serves to shape the institution.

In our talk, Kien described the first part of the exhibition as an introduction to the artist, to his work, and the blurry boundary between the two. In *Monstrous* (2013), a short film about the film *99%*, My Name is Trevor Shimizu? flashes across the screen, followed by a choppy collection of his childhood among the roses and ging hippies of Northern California. In addition to a brief greeting, this piece announces the disjunct humor and contemporary banality that characterize the other works in this show. Kien explained that the *Trevor Shimizu in Monstrous* (2013), however, is not identical to *Trevor Shimizu* the artist. This ambiguous level of memory and self-critique is a characteristic of both Shimizu's video and painting work. Throughout the exhibition, the artist evokes a sense of nostalgia which each allows him to measure not only our contemporary media landscape but the type of subjects it calls forth. Kien comments that these characters, often sad and insecure, present a subliminal male vulnerability, one without the anger that has come to dominate the popular idea of the male crafts.



Trevor Shimizu, still from "The Lovely Loner Things: Skate Videos," 2019, single-channel video, color, sound, 16:54 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI).

The *Lovely Loner Things* can be found on the second floor of the exhibition. Consisting of four videos—most of Shimizu's latest of them—the series includes *Skate Videos* (2019), *Running Headband and Headband Gear* (2019), *Mountain Bike* (2019), and *Internet Censor* (2019). In *Skate Videos*, one sees the familiar wryplay of an iPad, held by a figure who remains at all times playing video of skateboarders. In *Mountain Bike*, Shimizu said, "I think skateboarding is one of the most difficult things a person can do. That *Lovely Loner Skate* video came about when I was trying to take again. I was watching some videos by people twenty years younger than me and basically just felt like a *Lovely Loner* who couldn't skate." [3] Heard this way will give something that stands out about Skate, looking at a still from the work. I began to notice its unusual framing and partially visible figure. Kien revealed that these elements are due to the fact that the work was filmed on an early model of Google Glass or "smart glasses." Not only does this device allow the viewer to view the first person experience of watching internet videos on the road, but it also to the viewer's understanding of the person just at work. Shimizu explained later in the same interview, "The gear was essential to the *Lovely Loner* series. The thing I did initially, but I determined everything I did—how I moved, interacted with my surroundings—and I quickly became addicted to using it to shoot videos. I became the character 'not paying' because the tech guy, keeping around the house, researching his hobbies on an iPad." [4] This all too familiar, tech-savvy couch potato returns in the other three videos of the series, shopping for wineboards, learning about mountain bikes, and even attending a concert via an electronic device.

Bringing an art historical eye to these high tech snippets of contemporary media, Kien related this repetitive and time-based media performance—the shopping, surfing, streaming, and its documentation—to some of the earliest experiments with video art in the 1970s. When video technology first became commercially available, artists took to investigating its capabilities. They tested its ability to capture the passage of time by filming repetitive actions and tested configuring space by painting at intervals, at moments, and other scenes. Kien saw Shimizu as embracing these types of experiments for the internet age. Perhaps the repeated scrolling on the touch screen of a phone can tell us something about the sense of the internet. Perhaps filming on iPad through the lens of Google Glass can tell us something about the sense of the internet-mediated time and space we live in.

Trevor Shimizu: Performance Artist is not simply an exchange exhibition (if you are concerned you missed the show in person, you haven't). The show will open for the first and only time at Kunsthalte Lissabon. The name *Kunsthalte Lissabon* is itself a comment on the often how fleeting geography of contemporary art. "Kunsthalte" designates a non-collecting art institution, one that puts on temporary shows. *Artists' Room* is in and out of the space, possibly on an itinerary around the world. This title is usually followed by a specific geographical site, differing from Kunsthalte from another, but where it is located. The venue is somewhere between Portugal and Germany in the international flux of art, artists, and audiences. Germany is a major center of the international art world and "Lissabon" is "Lissabon" in German. It is a fitting name for a venue playing host to this multi-layered experiment with the idea of an art institution and the space of new media.

During the run of what Kien described as a decidedly ICA show, the European art space will have "ICA" written on the floor, will include and test and play video in ICA style, and will likely include ICA's usual opening counter-art dialogue. Almost all of the things that regard the ICA as an institution will be transported and fully include the other institution. This unique opportunity comes in the occasion of Kunsthalte Lissabon's 10th anniversary. Kunsthalte Lissabon has developed a close relationship with the ICA through the "10th anniversary" project and shares its goal of investigating the meaning of the art institution. To celebrate their decade of existence, Kunsthalte Lissabon decided to disappear temporarily. While they take this time to reflect on their own institution, they have decided to open their doors to their international partners. According to their website, "...for the initial institution will take over the space we will leave vacant. Not only the space but also our production and communication infrastructure, our resources and even our on-line presence. They will have to negotiate with and interact with a context that is not their own but for which they will have to work publicly." [5]

Taking up this challenge to publicly interact with a new context, Kien has chosen to exhibit an artist she sees as particularly "American." She was interested to see how Shimizu's brand of humor and up-to-the minute cultural reference had in a Portuguese audience. What of Shimizu's practice will be highlighted and what will not? At the beginning of our conversation, I had been unclear on the connection between Shimizu's work, which does not deal in an obvious way with the art institution with international exchange, and the ICA in the institution project. However, once Kien explained her reading of Shimizu's work in light of video formal experiments, and her reading of Shimizu as an "American" artist, the choice started to make more sense. I realized that while Shimizu's chosen forms—video, movies, Instagram stories—may travel seamlessly, his content—self-dramatizing comedy predicated on specific ideas of age, gender, and race—may not. I began to see what the combination of easily translatable media and less easily translatable culture might have to do with the value and goals of contemporary art institution in our globalized world. By shifting the physical setting and audience for these works and paying particular attention to the consequences of these moves, one begins to see what is unique to each art institution: the experience of art in a specific place and within a local community. In my opinion, by housing Shimizu's work, destination of a single pop list in the international pleasures of the Internet, and by showing it far away from the ICA community and location, the exhibition successfully highlights the importance of accessibility and physicality to be an institution and to the ICA Philadelphia itself.

Trevor Shimizu, *Performance Artist*, organized by the ICA Philadelphia at Kunsthalte Lissabon runs from November 20, 2019–February 1, 2020. Select works of Shimizu will be available on ICA's website throughout the run of the exhibition.

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[1] C. Spencer Webb and Trevor Shimizu, "Confusing and Accurate and Disruptive," *Born Magazine*, Feb. 19, 2019, Accessed November 1, 2019, <https://bornmagazine.com/2019/02/19/confusing-and-accurate-and-disruptive-trevor-shimizu/>.

[2] Ibid.

[3] "The Project," Kunsthalte Lissabon Website, Accessed 1 November 2019, <https://www.kunsthalte-lissabon.org/en/visit>.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

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