

Jeffrey Kastner, ARTFORUM INTERNATIONAL, February 2004

ALEKSANDRA MIR SWISS INSTITUTE

Naming Tokyo, 2003-, the most recent product of Aleksandra Mir's ever-growing conceptual cottage industry, demonstrates both the artist's numerous strengths and her particular limitations. The piece seen here is the second part of a project originally commissioned by the Palais de Tokyo in Paris; like all the prolific New Yorker's best work, it's informed by a generative interest in social systems and a fondness for offbeat forms of dissemination. Combining the enduring appeal of maps as sites for theoretical play and a cheerfully wayward brand of activist zeal, the project was inspired by Mir's words, by "the fact that westerners often complain that Tokyo has no street names. So I felt it would be interesting to start naming the streets of Tokyo with words from western culture and society, to help us around. Tokyo is large, so I asked my friends for help."

Mir has successfully deployed this sort of ingenuous participatory mode before. In Daily News, 2002, she enlisted over a hundred friends to contribute texts and images to a special Aleksandra Mir birthday edition of the New York tabloid designed to "reclaim" her birthday, which falls on September 11. For Naming Tokyo, dozens of acquaintances inside and outside the art world pitched in with thematic lists of suggested street names – Italian swear words, Vivienne Westwood's couture collections, New York City drag queens – which were then published on a large handout map with a blank Tokyo city grid on one side and selected rechristenings on the other. For the Swiss Institute, some favorites were made into actual New York-style street signs, turning the front half of the gallery into a forest of improbable intersections.

Like much of Mir's work, the project's structural open-endedness evokes a spirit of friendly egalitarianism, conjuring a sprawling network of mutual interest that we all might conceivably join, either simply as viewers or by actually submitting our own suggestions to an e-mail address provided on the handout. A genuine empathy toward others' stories and ideas is among the most appealing aspects of the artist's practice, a quality particularly vivid in works like Living and Loving No. 1: The Biography of Donald Cappy, 2002, an oddly moving limited-edition magazine that chronicles the life of a campus security officer the artist met during a California residency. In Naming Tokyo, Mir once again allows her collaborators to drive the content of her work. Yet though several individual entries represent real contextualized engagement and even rise to the level of poetry – Ricci Albenda's unexpectedly poignant "26 Words ending in pt., alphabetized backwards" produced a memorable sequence that reads in part, "KEPT., SLEPT., INEPT., CREPT., WEPT., SWEPT.," – in the end, the operative gestures of the project remain firmly in the hands of the its impresario.

Mir's practice projects an image of the artist as confidante, optimistic life of the party, and charming pedagogue, and most of the time these personae dovetail and ring true to the work. Yet there are elements of Naming Tokyo where an apparent ambivalence about which role to inhabit ends up leaving interesting threads of the work unexamined. For example, a statement by Mir on the map opens with this calculatedly blithe announcement: "I have never been to Tokyo, and I have no deeper knowledge of it. I only studied the available guidebooks for a week and relied solely on their wisdom for my system of designating my friend's [sic] lists of names to their appropriate neighborhoods." While the critical thinker in Mir presumably wants Naming Tokyo to interrogate that tourist take on the world – to examine the colonial tendencies (especially linguistic) implicit in globalization – the entertainer in her seems worried that pursuing the issue more acutely might spoil everybody's fun. So she raises it and then immediately plays it as a kind of self-deflating joke. Mir's lightness of touch can sometimes also yield a flatness of affect – in Naming Tokyo, she's produced something slighter than it might have been, a project finally more memorable for its winning delivery than for its underwhelming punch line.



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