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Artist intrigued by things we take for granted

By ANGELA JEFFS — Markuz Wernli Saito cannot come to the phone when I call him as arranged in Kyoto.

Markuz Wernli Saito, an interdisciplinary artist who is highly stimulated by life in Kyoto, says he tries to help people “discard preconceptions, revisit the way we see, and turn the ordinary and everyday into communal experiences.” When we speak later, he is full of apologies: “I was shooting for the exhibition ‘Peace Works’ that opens on Nov. 11 at the Kyoto Convention Center in Sangyo University. It then moves to International Community House on Dec. 6, also in Kyoto.”

Markuz has been using his wife, Yuka, as a model for an image that involved white hands, white feathers and a lot of flour flying around the set. “I’ll wait to see the pictures to decide whether it worked or not. It’s not easy to photograph peace.”

Markuz was brought to my attention several months ago when a friend in London got in touch to say that she had a very interesting Japan-based Swiss artist staying in her house, and perhaps I might like to talk to him. Thank you, Patsy.

It took until this week to link up with the man himself, because – as a visual artist interested in projects in which audiences can actively participate in the creative process – he was all over the place: Europe, the States, then back here.

As an interdisciplinary artist, Markus is fascinated by the dialectic of humans and their environment. “I try to help viewers and participants discard preconceptions, revisit the way we see, and turn the ordinary and everyday in- to communal experiences.”

Having grown up amid the bubbling sulfur springs of the famed Swiss spa village of Baden, Markus wonders if it is any coincidence that as a photographer and designer he find himself focusing his camera on the steamy world of the Japanese “sento.”

“What paths guided me to live in a tiny house next to Ginkakuji, Kyoto’s Silver Temple? And how did my 36 photographs of a Japanese sento come to be featured at the Noodle Gallery, a small but prestigious venue on the fringes of San Francisco’s Chinatown? It all links up, but life is mysterious, don’t you think?”

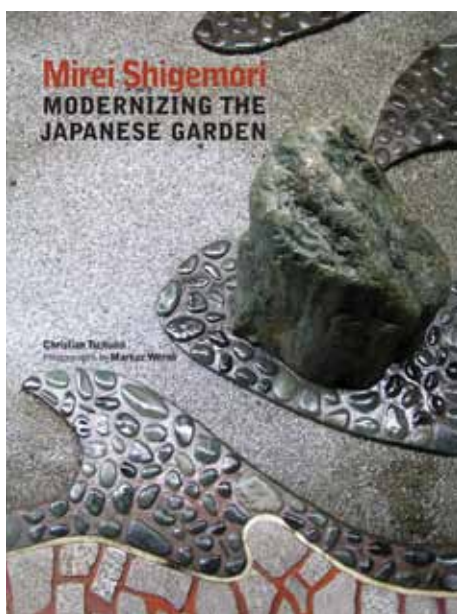
Born into a working-class family where “art was a fairly outlandish thing,” Markuz earned a bachelor’s degree in jewelry design, did a stint of mandatory military service in Switzerland and went back to art school in Zurich, where he earned a master’s in graphic design.

Since then, his career has led him to Camden, N.J., where he worked on a social internship with a Lutheran parish in an impoverished inner city; to Armenia to help build up a network of youth groups; and later to San Francisco, attracted by the boom of the Internet and new media, where he worked for several startups as a designer.

Five years later, he found himself in a corporate ad agency environment and very unhappy. “I came to Japan on a three-week trip in 2001 and found it so exciting. Back in San Francisco, taking Japanese lessons, I realized I had no option but to make a leap of faith. All the signs were pointing here.” He met Yuka, a pharmacist, just three weeks after returning to Kyoto.

Since then he has been “unbelievably busy.” There is so much stimulation here, he adds: “As a visual person in Japan, filled with curiosity, I seek to break the barrier between art and life.”

One photographic project focused on Chinese cigarette packages, resulting in two exhibitions and the inclusion of some of his pictures



Markuz Wernli Saitō, an interdisciplinary artist tries to “discard preconceptions, revisit the way we see, and turn the ordinary and everyday into communal experiences.” Photography is an aid to record and share the small daily wonders and insignificant visual sensations that we are privileged to witness – the precious, short moments when life suddenly comes to a halt.

LEFT: Cover of Markuz’ recently published photo book on Shigemori’s rebellious Japanese gardens.



in “Smoke: A Global History of Smoking,” published by the U.K.’s Reaktion Books. Another project documented the Kamogawa River as Kyoto’s social hub. A series of these pictures appeared in the August edition of Kansai Time Out.

He has a close relationship also with Kyoto Journal, which regularly publishes his work. And if you pick up a postcard at the Kamibashi Paper Store from a series called “Kyoto Moments,” this too can be attributed to his time and energy.

“More recently I’ve been piling up stones and leaving notes and pictures beside the Philosopher’s Path, which is near my house. I hope they inspire walkers to notice and participate. . . . It’s just one way I try to bring art into everyday life.”

What was he doing in London in the summer? “Giving a talk at the Regent Street Apple Store about my book on Shigemori Mirei, who was a disputed garden designer last century. Traditional Japanese gardeners didn’t like him at all. But I see his work from a visual rather than a historic perspective.”

He gave a similar talk in the Apple Store in San Francisco back in May. A group called Design Matters meets monthly at the Osaka Apple Store, to discuss how to raise public awareness about design in general. “This where the idea to promote my book – published by Stone Bridge Press in California – was born.”

While Markuz continues to build up an impressive design portfolio, exhibiting abroad and winning any number of international awards, it’s interesting that in Japan his projects are so much more local based.

Lecturing at Kyoto Zokei University of Art and Design, he finds time, however, for postgraduate research at TransArt Institute (Danube University, Vienna), investigating how relationships and participation are produced through participatory and experiential forms of art in the public domain. “I’d very much like to teach more.”

Markus does not like the word “artist” very much. He thinks it loaded and off-putting, choosing rather to connect with people at a more mundane human level.

“My photography helps me to record and share the small daily wonders and insignificant visual sensations that I am privileged to witness – the precious, short moments when life suddenly comes to a halt. I am intrigued by rediscovering what seems ordinary or what we simply take for granted.”

Web sites: www.markuz.com, www.momentarium.org