



**MUSEUMS/GALLERIES**

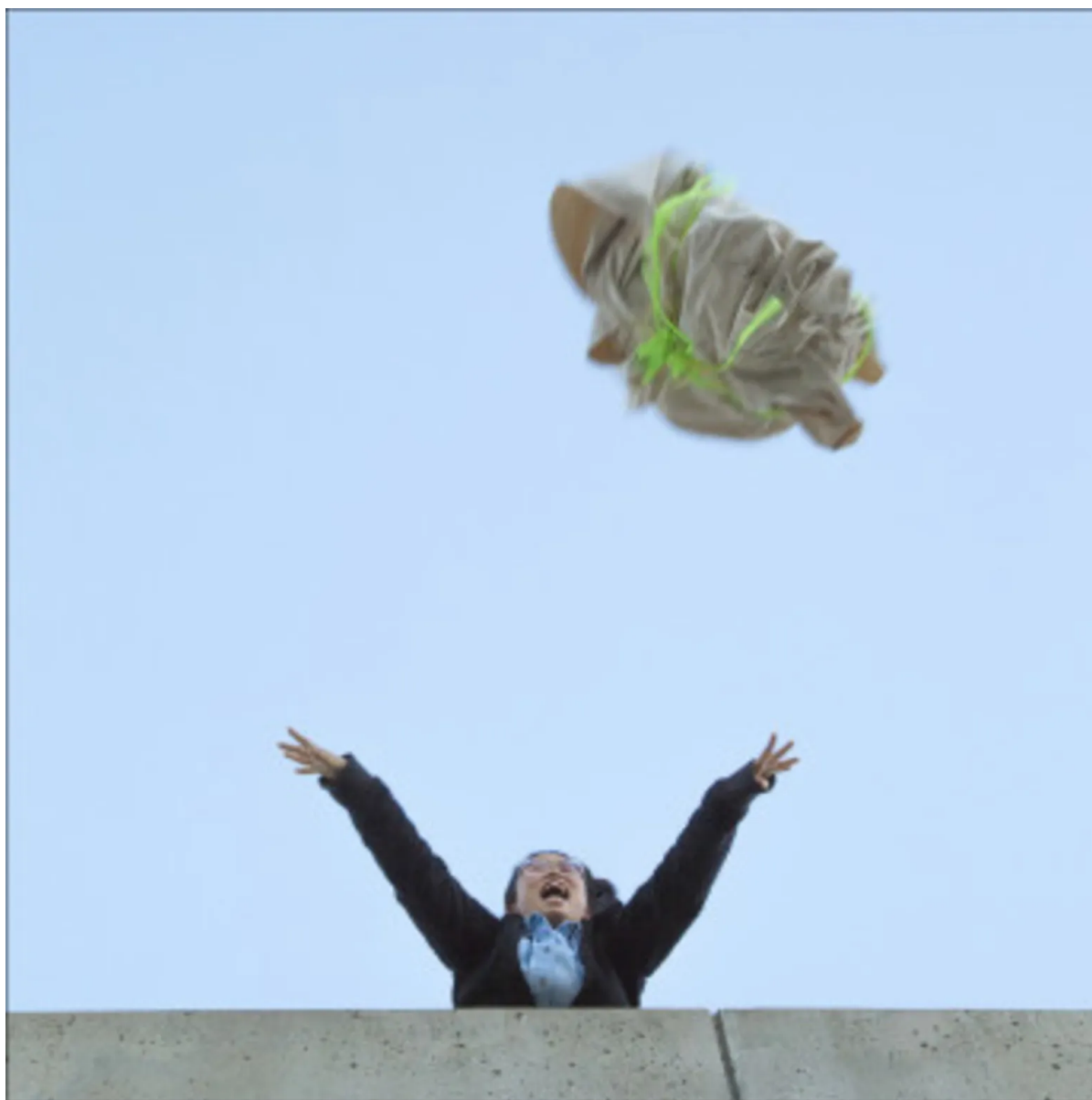
# Naoko Wowsugi + Whoop Dee Doo at Hamiltonian Gallery, Reviewed

*Make your art professor a gift for her birthday. No pressure.*



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Here, Credit: Angela Goerner, courtesy of Hamiltonian Gallery

Some people can be so difficult about their birthdays. Expensive dinners, cabin weekends, a birthday penumbra that expands until you find yourself celebrating someone's birthday week or birthday month—birthday-zillas are always wrecking the calendar. But nobody goes as big on her birthday as Naoko Wowsugi.

For the last few years, Wowsugi, an art professor at American University, has asked her students to make her a birthday present as a class project. In addition to video art, Wowsugi teaches a class called "Time-Based Media," which you'll find over in the performance wing (so to speak). "I don't need

more material possessions,” her class prompt reads. “You don’t need to butter me up. I want experiences as my birthday gifts.”

“Assignment: Happy Birthday”—a show by Wowsugi at Hamiltonian Gallery—is as clever as exhibits come. Wowsugi’s work here isn’t her own, but rather the work of her students, meaning the artist’s titular role in the show’s production is somewhere between curator and conductor. The work on view may be the students’, but it deserves an asterisk, too: This isn’t an American University group art show so much as a collection of exercises urged by a professor’s prompt. “Assignment” is challenging along an author-artwork spectrum of analysis, but it’s also a big birthday jumble of fun and frivolity (and failure).

There are some Fs to be handed out after “Assignment,” for sure. Angel Samudre’s “Time-Based Studio Sings Naoko Wowsugi’s Philosophy of Teaching in the Style of John Baldessari Sings Sol LeWitt” (2014) is exactly what it sounds like. (Or worse, since the students can’t carry a tune.) Students are forever learning the wrong lessons from the wildly inventive performance artist Baldessari: Do *as* he does, not *what* he does. Rebekah Pike’s “3 Red and 2 Green” (2012) comprises found products made with apple coloring or flavoring—give the teach an apple, get it?—but that doesn’t seem to meet the parameters of the assignment.

Another student went far beyond the classroom’s walls (and U.S. borders) to fulfill the project. HwaJin Shin notes in her video, “The Route to Home” (2012), that Wowsugi’s birth certificate features an address that places her permanent home in the middle of a field in South Korea. (Wowsugi, an artist of Japanese and Korean descent, has studied art at Osaka University of Arts in Japan and the Kansas City Art Institute, and received her MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University.) So Shin—from her classroom at VCU, where Wowsugi was teaching at the time—asked family and friends back home in South Korea to drive some four hours to plant a tree at the GPS coordinates indicated as Wowsugi’s address. The video is searching and sincere—too earnest, really, but also an interesting redirect, with Shin essentially assigning out an endurance performance to people who’d be willing to do it for her, if not for Wowsugi.

Then there's Tim Hoyt's "Magnified Reciprocity" (2014). I don't know whether to give it the lowest or highest marks, which makes it a compelling piece, albeit maybe the least likable one in the show. For Wowsugi's birthday, Hoyt composed a new piece of music for her. I'm no music critic, but to my ear, the song's swells of synthesized-sounding harmonies sound indistinguishable from those of Brooklyn electronic-rock duo Ratatat. (I wonder, in fact, whether it might be a remix.)

To make this a piece of time-based art, not just a piece of music, Hoyt video-recorded Wowsugi (and himself) as she listens to the song for the first time. "Magnified Reciprocity" is an indulgent video: The two sit face to face against a stark backdrop, co-stars in this birthday production, Hoyt beaming as Wowsugi concentrates on the sounds streaming through her headphones. It's a total jerk move. (Imagine your boyfriend making a video about your reaction to his very special gift for you.) With "Magnified Reciprocity," Hoyt has made Wowsugi's birthday about Hoyt.

Then again, why shouldn't he? There's nothing organic about "Assignment," after all. Maybe Hoyt felt pressed into service, celebrating his professor's birthday. Or maybe he simply perceived that he's the artist creating work here, not her. Hoyt's poncey video makes us face the facts: There's a touch of selfishness to even the most generous gestures. Sometimes favors have to be earned.

Another twist in the show, Erin Nanney's "Eulogy" (2014), took the prompt in the opposite direction. Instead of celebrating her professor's birthday, Nanney ends her life. Video of the undertaking shows Wowsugi standing in the wings like a ghost attending her own funeral, one who can't keep a straight face throughout the somber ceremony. Several students say words, not all of them especially reverent, in the video, which is embedded in a shrine. Here's where some of the cynicism I see in Hoyt's work might've done Nanney some good: What does a literal 180-degree pivot on the prompt get for Nanney? Maybe an A, but not an artwork.

For "Here, Throw This Off a Building" (2013), Randall Lear handed Wowsugi a package with those instructions. Although she didn't know it, inside were

several paintings and projects that Lear had made earlier in his young career. This made the professor the unknowing participant in an act of creative destruction. By dint of Wowsugi's assignment, Lear made new work from old; thanks to Lear, Wowsugi got to throw stuff off a building for her birthday. That's an experience worth remembering—and so is Wowsugi's art exhibit.

Bonkers is the only word to describe the opening-night performance by Whoop Dee Doo (if a video of the event is any indication). The work of artists Matthew Roche and Jaimie Warren since 2006, Whoop Dee Doo is a traveling performance troupe that incorporates whoever's near and whatever's at hand for anything-goes installations. For "Baphy Hirpday 2012," Whoop Dee Doo turned Hamiltonian's birthday-themed exhibit into a full-on U Street party.

The centerpiece of "Baphy Hirpday" is a cake, surrounded by walls lined with presents. What makes the piece sing, though, are students from the Hung Tao Choy Mei Leadership Institute, a martial-arts studio located just next door, as well as performers from the Girlz With Glam after-school program. While artists always pay lip service to incorporating the community, it's a rare delight to see it done so fabulously.

What a baphy hirpday it was. A dancing Chinese dragon! A gift-box hiding a drummer! Girls camouflaged as birthday cake! Choreographed martial artists! Dark eclectic synths! By the looks on the kids' faces, "Baphy Hirpday" was as much a present for them as for Wowsugi or anybody else. Whoop Dee Doo delivered a special gift for viewers: a reminder that art is the icing on the cake.

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