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Junk imitates art: Artists turn offbeat Soho electronics store into art project

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Photo by Tequila Minsky

Musician Aki Onda, center, picks out materials for his opening night improvised performance at Argo Electronics on Jan. 5, while Motoko Fukuyama, at right, films the process for her art project called "You Never Know What Idea You Might Have" — which is also the store's slogan.

BY DENNIS LYNCH

An artist has channeled her love for a legendary Soho electronics “junk” store into a two-month-long, constantly evolving art show at nearby gallery space Recess Activities.

Motoko Fukuyama has tasked more than a dozen fellow artists with a mission: go to Argo Electronics on Canal St. with \$100, pick out whatever you can buy for that price, and turn it into any sort of art piece you want.

For the title of the project, Fukuyama adopted Argo Electronics’ slogan from their wacky commercials on YouTube: “You Never Know What Idea You Might Have” — and is filming the entire process for a documentary of the same name.

“I basically took it literally, you know — ‘let’s go to Argo Electronics, and you never know what idea you might have,’” Fukuyama said. “I think that place is really inspiring, I think you go there and there’s all kinds of possibilities — could be about the history, materials, everything has such potential.”

Artists have two days to work on their pieces at the Recess gallery space. Visitors are welcome to come watch them work and watch Fukuyama film them, so long as they’re okay with being in Fukuyama’s film.

“If there’s something interesting that comes out of the interaction I would definitely like to use that as part of the film,” she said.

When we stopped by Recess on Jan. 7, mixed-media artist Ryan Foerster was standing over a large table of finished and half-finished sculptures surrounded by Argo-sourced junk and photos Foerster took at the store. He’s incorporating the photos into his piece, which Fukuyama encouraged. She purposely gave the artists almost no rules or guidelines, noting that another artist was planning to incorporate some poetry inspired by Argo into her work.

Foerster had a relatively straightforward method for deciding what to take back to Recess: “the most f****ed-up s*** you can find there,” he said. “I like the aesthetics of the entire store, so much s*** to look at.”



Photo by Tequila Minsky

Argo Electronics, a legendary Canal St. purveyor of electrical odd and ends, boasts so many eclectic offerings that they literally spill out onto the sidewalk.



Photo by Tequila Minsky

As Aki Onda works on his improvised piece, Motoko Fukuyama films the process and projects it on the wall for onlookers to watch in real time.

Musician Aki Onda was the first artist to dive into the bins at Argo, on the project's opening night, Jan. 5. Surrounded by onlookers, Argo's owner, and Fukuyama with her camera, the rubber-gloved musician pulled out old broken telephones, tape players, speakers, and other colorful trinkets he found in the depths of the store. Back at Recess, he improvised an elaborate instrument — he wired speakers to harness their vibrations to create physical noisemakers, and laid out everything he found in a pleasingly organized, chromatic arrangement on the table.

Fukuyama first discovered Argo Electronics after going to a since-closed sister store in Brooklyn to repair her Panasonic camera in the early 2000s. The repairman forgot a screw, so

owner Zdislav David Lasevski, showed up at her door himself to pick up the camera to add the screw. She kept coming back and got to know Lasevski.

In 2012, he let her shoot a horror movie at an empty grocery store he owned upstate that he was using to store merchandise from his recently closed Brooklyn Army Terminal location.

Lasevski is reason alone to stop by Argo. The Polish-born Israeli orphan was a sailor in his younger days, but when his boat landed in New Jersey and he fixed his eyes on New York City for the first time, he grabbed his suitcase and jumped ship. He became a technician in factory, working on machine tools.

One fateful day in the late 1970s, Lasevski went to Argo for a component he needed to repair and resell some calculators. He was haggling with the owner over the price when the exasperated owner told him he could have the whole place for \$4,000. Lasevski took him up on the offer, and 20 years later he bought the whole building.

Canal St. was "all army surplus and electronic stores" when he bought Argo, Lasevski recalls, but now the eclectic shop one of the last store of its kind there. It doesn't make much money, but Lasevski said he can't let go.

“When I was on the ship, another seaman was a momma’s boy and he met a bad girl out on the shore and brought her back on the ship and they let her stay on for our trips, and she was fooling around with everyone. We’d say ‘your wife is with the captain,’ ‘your wife is with this person or that person,’ and he’d just put his hands to his side and say ‘what can I do? I love her,’” Lasevski said. “It’s the same thing with me and the store. I could do anything I want, anything else, but I love it.”

Property taxes and other expenses are taking their toll on his business though. Online shopping and the advent of the all-in-one entertainment devices like the iPad have killed demand for radio tuners, amplifiers, and turntables, he said.

Lasevski says he has no immediate plans to sell off the building and retire to Florida with the profits, but you can never know how much time is left to visit Argo — a trip that Fukuyama called a necessity for anyone who comes to Recess to see her project.

Fukuyama will screen “You Never Know What Idea You Might Have,” at the closing reception on March 2 from 6–8 p.m. at Recess Activities (41 Grand St. between Thompson and W. Broadway). All the artists’ pieces will be on display at the closing reception. Check out Recess’s website, www.recessart.org, for dates of musical performances that are part of the project.

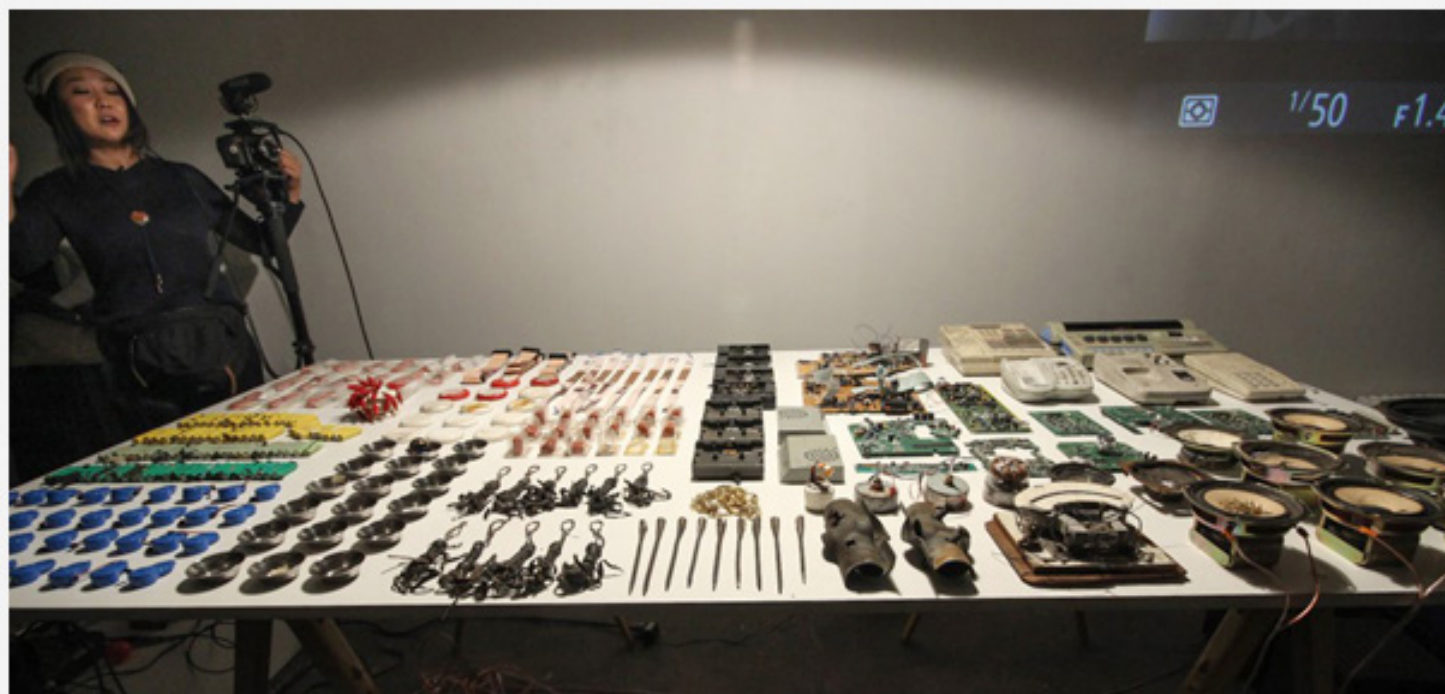


Photo by Tequila Minsky

Aki Onda’s finished piece is visual and aural, comprised of ambient improvised noise and curious artifacts he dug out of Argo Electronics’ bins.