



ALL TOGETHER NOW

PROXIMITY BREEDS
CREATIVITY FOR
KOHEI NAWA'S
SANDWICH
COLLECTIVE

BY SARAH P. HANSON



Kohei Nawa.

BELOW:
The Sandwich building on the southern bank of the Uji River, outside Kyoto.

ACROSS A SOYBEAN FIELD

on the southern bank of the Uji River, which underlines the quaint, temple-laden city of Kyoto, sits a small factory. It no longer produces sandwiches, as it did for years, but the place still hums with industry, evidenced by the cluster of bikes outside its entrance.

Since 2009, the factory has been home to the studio of artist Kohei Nawa, known for his texture-obsessed oeuvre of two- and three-dimensional works employing beads, prisms, glue, plaster, and spray foam. His most in-depth series to date, "PixCell," scavenges motifs and objects from the Internet—everything from shoes to toy tanks to taxidermied animals—and covers them in acrylic and clear glass beads, blurring their contours while magnifying certain details. The day I visit, a half dozen assistants kneel with gloves and glue guns underneath a deer suspended upside down in a large vise. An upright deer behind it is dotted with Styrofoam balls in various sizes, Nawa's road map for the application of the beads. Another herd of deer—and one baby elephant, just delivered—await their turn in the next room.



“THE POSSIBILITY EXISTS HERE FOR SOMETHING NORMALLY CONSIDERED IMPOSSIBLE TO BECOME REAL.”

Although demand for Nawa's work has only increased—he took the grand prize at the 2010 Asian Art Biennial in Bangladesh; is represented by one of Tokyo's top galleries, SCAI The Bathhouse; and last year the Metropolitan Museum, in New York, acquired his *PixCell Deer #24*, 2011—the artist has taken pains to style the studio as a platform for creation of all kinds. “The word *platform* suggests a reciprocal equality among the people in any position, generation, or specialized field,” says Nawa. “There is no hierarchy here. All the materials, technologies, and

human resources are in free contact with each other, and during the process of mingling with others, incidental creations are born accidentally and unexpectedly.”

Inspired by the studio of Jeppe Hein, in Berlin, and Studio Banana, a loose collective of autonomous creators in Madrid, Nawa, who holds a Ph.D. in sculpture from Kyoto City University of Arts, sought to orchestrate the ideal conditions for creative foment. He found the building in the classifieds, and with the advice and assistance of his architect friends such as Emi Hatanaka, Yuichi Kodai, Yoshitaka Lee, and Yuko Nagayama, renovated the bi-level, open-plan, steel-framed space to include a conference/seminar room, a kitchen, and a 12-bed dormitory for visiting artists. He invited comrades and colleagues in graphic design, production, and architecture—most of them local to the Kyoto/Osaka area, though some work off-site and even overseas—to join.

If Studio Banana is styled as a consortium, Sandwich, as it's dubbed, has emerged as more of a cooperative, with a growing load of joint projects. And as the studio's scope has broadened to include product and interior design, the range of needed skills has expanded, too. Its members recently found themselves working on exhibition designs or conceptualizing interiors for restaurants such as Mme Kiki, in Kobe. Sandwich exhibited at the Tokyo Frontline fair in February and is active locally as well, organizing programming for the Hotel Anteroom in Kyoto, a kind of high-end hostel for design buffs.

Sometimes projects come from farther afield. After the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo presented “Synthesis,” a wide-ranging solo show of Nawa's work, last summer, he was contacted by fashion designer Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, who asked him to design the headwear for her spring/summer 2012



runway presentation in Paris that October. Given the theme of "White Drama" and knowing only that Kawakubo admired Nawa's "Scum" sculptures in spray foam, the Sandwich team set about creating caps that resembled deflating clouds or Marie Antoinette wigs sculpted in soft-serve ice cream. "Her requirements completely respected the artist's inspiration," Nawa notes.

Although the studio worked blindly, without even a hint as to what the clothes looked like, Kawakubo was so pleased with the result that she commissioned Sandwich to produce "White Pulse," an installation of 258 white plaster-coated iron pipes, for the newest outpost of her Dover Street Market, which is dedicated to a tightly curated selection of clothing and homewares from the likes of Rick Owens and Martin Margiela. Over the course of three months, the Sandwich architects used the store's blueprints to create a 3-D model for Nawa and the designers to test out ideas and arrangements, while the production team experimented with plaster-pouring techniques. Prototypes of the sculptures, which looked like a heartbeat monitor line rendered in three dimensions, were wrapped in plastic on the ground floor in December; the store opened in Tokyo's posh Ginza district in March.

Such opportunities for creation, broadly defined, have made Sandwich a magnet in the Kyoto region. Kousaku Matsumoto, who previously worked for Sou Fujimoto Architects, in Tokyo, and for himself, says, "I was planning to go to a foreign country and had applied to New York firms. But I was still checking the Sandwich home page," hoping for a chance to join. Fluidity was its appeal. "This studio is very different from other companies and studios," he continues. "My job is very abstract. Everyone works on everything, and the circumstances are always changing. Each staff member is professional but also flexible." Matsumoto approaches his role at the studio as a kind of social architect: "I'm interested in how we use this space to connect people." Miho Harada, a production staffer, mentions the convivial atmosphere, exemplified by simple, family-style meals served at a long table in the kitchen.

That's exactly what Nawa hopes to achieve. "I feel the possibility exists here for something that would normally be considered impossible to become real," he says. "The people here are addicted to creating things. We open acceptance to students, interns, and employees, so we are always in a state of chaos." Indeed, watching the Sandwich members at work, it's hard to tell where one project stops and another begins. The day of my visit, a drawing penciled on the wall could have been a sketch for one of Nawa's glue-based skeins but instead is a backdrop left over from a music-video shoot the previous week—one more type of creation absorbed into the Sandwich orbit. **MP**



ABOVE
Kohei Nawa
PixCell Deer #24, 2011. Mixed media.
On view at the Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Comme des Garçons' Dover Street Market
store in Tokyo, featuring the sculptural
installation "White Pulse" by Sandwich.

Detail of "White Pulse" in the studio.

Polygon-Double Yujin (left) and *Polygon-Double Koji* (right) at Sandwich.

The Sandwich production staff at work.