

Yoshinori Niwa *That Language Sounds Like a Language*

10 November - 21 December 2017
Tuesday to Saturday 11am - 6pm
Opening: 6-8pm Thursday 9 November



Yoshinori Niwa's second solo exhibition at Edel Assanti converges four of Niwa's recent performance / film works in an examination of the boundaries of "publicness", nationhood and the mechanisms of group identity. *That Language Sounds Like a Language* focuses on the question of how we define our collective identity: is it by shared political views, or mutual identification with a nation? Is it the language we speak, or a shared understanding of historical events?

Niwa's practice takes the form of social interventions, executed through performance, video and installation. Niwa deploys a nonsensical vernacular to examine socio-political realities, an artistic strategy whose roots can be traced to the post-war Japanese avant-garde. His works' titles are self-explanatory, usually providing an exhaustive account of the performance contained within the film itself. Through the construction of absurd scenarios, Niwa exposes and evaluates the systems that drive contemporary society.

The exhibition's starting point is Niwa's film *Asking Taiwanese People to sing the national anthem of the Republic of China while listening to the national anthem of the People's Republic of China*. The artist invites two citizens of Taiwan to sing their own national anthem whilst a group of musicians play the tune of the Chinese national anthem. The resulting rendition signifies a simultaneous act of conformation and resistance, bringing the historical conflict of Taiwanese sovereignty to the forefront of the question of national cultural identity.

The performance mirrors the ambiguity of the issue surrounding Taiwan's independence on the international stage, which permits each different party to interpret Taiwan's legal status in whatever incompatible way is most acceptable to its own members. Niwa's two films relating to Taiwan were produced during his forty day trip to Taipei in 2014, just after the Sunflower Student Movement famously occupied parliament, blocking legislative approval of a controversial trade deal with China in the largest anti-China demonstration in recent Taiwanese history. In the process of realising these works, Niwa interviewed many students and activists to gain an insight into a moment that embodies the disjuncture between national and individual identity.

Requesting People in Taiwan who I met by chance to declare that if they die, Taiwan will disappear explores the boundaries between individuals and nations, questioning how and where the merger of the two entities occurs. Niwa undertakes this thought experiment in order to reveal what people think would happen if all the members of a nation were to die one after another; logically, the experiment infers, that nation would cease to exist. This work echoes several previous gestures by the artist designed to explore the implicit flattening of individual will that occurs under the banner of publicness.

In *Forcing people to speak about something they don't understand*, Niwa invites his girlfriend to read out a policy speech made by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on 26th September 2016. Although his girlfriend clearly does not speak Japanese, she is able to annunciate the speech using a phonetic transcription of the text. Observing the reading by someone who is linguistically prevented from understanding it draws our attention to language's status as an exclusive medium of exchange and record, highlighting its limitations and vagueness. This performance equally draws on former actions by Niwa, including his 2013 performance *Making a political speech intentionally translated with a different meaning*, which explored the impossibility of seeking "truth" within political and historical discourse.

Finally, *Resending postcards sent during the Cold War to the intended recipients* documents the artist visiting flea markets in Vienna (where he currently lives) and Budapest, retracing the former Cold War boundary to search for postcards unsuccessfully sent across the border during that period. Having purchased them, Niwa stamps and sends them to the originally intended recipients from a post office, saving several that are exhibited alongside the film. The vast majority of the postcards will almost certainly go missing due to the recipients' having died or their addresses having changed. Niwa's attempt to complete the journey of these letters goes unobstructed by bygone ideological and physical obstacles, only to be rendered futile by the interrupted passage of time from the Cold War to the present.

Niwa graduated Tama Art University's Department of Moving Images and Performing Arts in 2005. Recent solo exhibitions include *Yoshinori Niwa: Selected Video Works*, Mori Art Museum, Japan (2017); *Against Name*, Minatomachi Art Table, Japan (2016); *Research & Production: Artistic Methods in a Transitional Period*, Tamsui Historical Art Museum, Taiwan (2014). Recent group exhibitions include *Setouchi Triennale 2016*, Japan (2016); *Our Beloved World*, Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan (2016); *Aichi Triennale 2013*, Aichi Arts Center (2013); *Roppongi Crossing 2013: OUT OF DOUBT*, Mori Art Museum (2013); *Double Vision: Contemporary Art From Japan*, Moscow Museum of Modern Art, Haifa Museum of Art (2012). Niwa's work is included in international collections including the Mori Art Museum (Tokyo), Kadist Art Foundation (San Francisco / Paris), Hitotsubashi University (Tokyo) and the Fukutake Foundation (Kagawa). Niwa lives and works in Vienna, Austria.

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