

F. Atsumi in conversation with Yoshinori Niwa

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Yoshinori Niwa Speaks — On Other Works

—When did you first find your interest in performance, video, and socio-political themes? [—moment of expression / experiment / historical materialism]

I was part of a punk band when I was a teenager. We went from playing punk, then gravitated towards extreme musical genres like noise music. I then started having doubts about conducting musical expression within the group dynamic, and also myself in relation to the medium of 'sound'. It was a natural progression for my focus to drift towards art. I'd already started to explore my expressions freely. When I was still at art university, I was involved in live performance art. This is mainly because it didn't have the same financial stipulations as having to rent a studio, a house or whatever. This then enabled me to be more creative as it required only myself for my performance, regardless of time and place. It allowed me to experiment radically and in a portable way. Still today, all I need to work is a laptop and a video camera wherever I go. Being aware of the political and historical settings of a society can be really difficult. When I was still a student, I never really thought about the historical affairs of the past, or how the principles and structures of society were made. When we see the intangible cloud of media, what we see is everything, so I needed to understand and experience where all these things come from. I'm not very interested in what is referred to as "official history", or how that gets certified. What I find fascinating is being able to get the latest news on issues/conflicts from around the world. Even if these incidents occur far away from my daily reality, I am able to get them in near real-time on TV or the internet. I think most people feel like that they "play no part in this". I felt unsatisfied through my own personal expression as a "performance artist". I was using just my body movements, but then I realised that history and society are tangible, contextual, and both linked to the concept of time and space. Performance art usually consists of small venues, and then I started to become aware that I could have a more wide-spread influence, by simple use of the video camera. Since then, I began to film social experiments. They're distinct from merely cataloguing a performance or a subjective documentary, but they are designed to include and record acts with just the presence of a camera. The contents of the videos are clearly stated in their titles. This is how I challenge myself to adhere to that original concept of the video. I try to take on board the unexpected negotiations, doubts or complications that are revealed in the process. The video titles are written in one sentence, which reminds me of lines written for a theater play. My illogical sequence of repetitive actions, which are indicated by the titles, might be considered theatrical or dramatic as well.

—Is art considered to be a resistance against science and reason? Your works might be recognised as some pieces of theater of the absurd. [—cunning of reason / indetermination / epistemological rupture]

"Reason" is a weird thing. I've always been interested in science and math, but they often leave me with amorphous questions about how their concepts are framed. They appear to pose a sort of monotheistic perspective that can be described as "the only right way to verify reality is with measurable evidence". I guess that this sort of solid and explicit theory is a very straightforward way of interpreting the world. Since monotheistic values aren't commonplace in Japan or other Asian countries, I am also not comfortable with this ideology. I feel like the world becomes deformed when society forces a concrete definition on it. I'd like to borrow the phrase of Paul Karl Feyerabend, a philosopher of science, who said "anything goes", and I believe that would be a truer and accurate description of reality. The mathematician John Nash, who challenged the "Riemann hypothesis", said in an interview that math requires both logical and illogical thinking. I really sympathise with this concept. I don't really know what the "theater of the absurd" means. However, I have put a lot of wordplay and conceptual twists into my works. For example, A Pointless Group Photo of 76 People (2009) is a project set in a major tourist site in Toronto, where I took group photos with total strangers. I was experimenting with the concept of "we", and how this relates to ourselves within the group. Basically, I wanted to define the boundary line that separates the "people you know" from the "people you don't know".

—How are you conscious of avant-garde or anti-art movement? Alienation effect can be seen in some of your works and your repetitive actions. [—labour value / ghost of revolution / production process]

In Transforming Puddle A to Puddle B (2004) and Holding a Demonstration from the Prime Minister's Official Residence to the Peak of Mt. Fuji (2012), I tried to connect different spaces that were environmentally and politically estranged, by using myself and my actions as a conduit. I am very mindful of going back and forth between utopian ideas of a united Earth, a world without boundaries and the real world with all conflicts and issues. It may seem like I'm just mindlessly repeating my actions, but I am trying to develop a mindful focus into something that can be defined as art. This is achieved by fully experiencing the time during performance, the struggle between my inner world and the elements which encroach on me from exchanges with the outside world. For me, that is the essential process in completing these projects. Also, because I was born in Nagoya (Aichi prefecture), the group Zero Jigen from the late 60s to 70s had no small influence on me. I actually saw them, and already thought of art as something where "anything goes". A few years back when I traveled to Germany, I remember when an artist asked me "Honestly, you want to start a revolution, right?". In retrospect, that's when I realised that the concept of my actions came from an existential question of how to create an existence through external communications of free will since I believe that human beings cannot exist in a solitary state. For me, the art of avant-garde or the main subject of art is facing the question of how to solidify and realise the human experience through activity. This is inspired by a firm conviction whereby feedback and struggle will be involved in the process of spontaneous realisation.

—Do you find any alert to Marxism and totalitarianism? Themes such as nationality and ideology are often seen in your work. [—spirit of the age / projection to the death / surplus value]

Many of my works are made without any awareness of Karl Marx. But I think I'm intuitively drawing up similar ideas regarding "production", "exchange" and "labour" that Karl Marx had reflected on, as I keep approaching the "wonder of possession" in my own way. I often think about the relationship between the existence of the individual and the nation, or the masses as a collective of individuals. By dismantling national organisations, we get to see that it is made of individual parts. This reminds me of the strangeness I used to feel when thinking about individual existence against nationality. They seem to be completely opposed to each other, even though individuals are what underpin any nation or organisation. This inspires me to make unique approaches towards my projects. I shot a video for the project Walk in the Opposite Direction of a Parade in 2011, during a big anti-nuclear demonstration just three months after the Great East Japan Earthquake. Most of the civic media were broadcasting things like "The anti-nuclear opinion was demonstrated by the enormous gathering! This is the will of the people!", and I watched it with a strange feeling. Because there were so many people, there must have been a whole myriad of opinions. These opinions must be impossible to summarise, as it is difficult to disguise them into a single flattened belief. As people get together in a crowd, everything begins to get lumped together. This made me feel like something bad could happen. It might be a question against our system of democracy. For extending this idea, I made an experiment in Requesting People in Taiwan Who I Met by Chance to Declare If They Die, Taiwan Will Disappear (2014) to illustrate how and where individuals and nations become connected. If all the people of a nation were to die, then logically that nation should also disappear. But the nation-state is somehow undisturbed even when only a single individual within dies. This is a 'thought' experiment designed to reveal what people think would happen if everybody in the nation were to die one after the other. I am very interested in death and things that are often viewed negatively in our society. Everyone knows that someday they will die, but they don't want to talk about it, and they simply repeat the cheesy and "official" educational values of living optimistically. I'm partly inspired by a strong opposition towards these ideals, but in many cases, I am eager to reconstruct, even for myself, the sense of worth that spills out of contemporary values, as well as those that are being marginalised or denied.

—Do you have sympathy for what is excluded by society? Garbage is often focused in your works. [—exchange value / reification / fatal leap]

No phenomenon is completely isolated. Everything occurs because of influences resulting from several other phenomena. When thinking about such ideas in the context of our daily lives, domestic garbage is a very good metaphor to approach. I traveled to the United States with a trash bag from my home in the project Going to San Francisco to Dispose of My Garbage (2006). By keeping a bag filled with garbage, something which people normally want to throw away as soon as possible, or not even deal with at all, there occurred some conceptual friction with the sense of general value for that trash. The worth of something can be transformed by just altering its environment here by crossing borders to realise the project without any changes to the garbage itself, it gained value by becoming novel and rare in this new environment. The value of worth in which people stake their very lives is fragile and composed of a balance of powers and opinions to unseen influences and environments. For example, the once celebrated Lenin Statue became transformed into a negative image of the past when the Soviet Union transformed into Russia. I have a lot of interest in the shadows that are borne when there is a shift in history, and I know that it's something that pulls people's heart. People also have doubts and anxieties in the bottom of their hearts to the impossibility of boundless economic growth that is necessary for capitalism to succeed indefinitely. Everyone knows that there are always pros and cons to a thing, but they transform due to both circumstance and environment. In the project Selling the Rights to Name a Pile of Garbage (2014) that took place in the city of Manila, the Philippines, I investigated the value of garbage and landfills, which are usually regarded as undesirable by society. Trash collected from all around the city became a mountain of refuse. Nobody in the city could say that they didn't have anything to do with that pile of garbage, regardless whether or not they found it disgusting. I fulfilled the project by involving the local media, such as TV and newspapers and the meaning of garbage in society was highlighted. I blurred lines between garbage, property rights, and naming rights by making small cracks in people's views and perceptions. In terms of the conceptual value of naming rights beyond the tangible monetary value, I was interested in what would happen, or what could change, when what was once the property of a single individual shifted to the property of a society.

—What do you think about Japan and the artistic activity within? [—sublation of fundamentalism / overdetermination / future]

Perhaps it goes against the trend of internationalisation, but I'm thinking about the possibility of Japan 'isolating' itself again. This idea came from my absolute attitude that aims to contradict a single value of globalism that measures the entire world. In order to solve the issue of the US army bases in Okinawa, we have to recognise that it only depends on the Japan-US alliance and the Japanese self-defense force. By asking the US to withdraw their army bases in Okinawa and denouncing that the alliance should turn the self-defense force into a national army, Japan can in some ways solve the issue of the right of collective self-defense. We prohibit trade exchange, economic activity with other countries, and the migration of people. But on the other hand, we could also think about having Okinawa separate from Japan. If Okinawa was not part of Japan, then there would be no obligation for the US to put army bases there. These are thought experiments, but it's important to think them over from a broader point of view. Both the left-wing and right-wing opinions of Japan tend to only discuss issues at a pinpoint focus, and one by one. However the actual issues themselves are not like that. The issues are inter-connected; one situation supports or causes the situations. Being aware of the fact that everything exists in this sequence of influences, we need to clarify what formulates the illusion of what we believe Japan to be, involving its history. The same goes for our consideration of our definition of what art is (even when it might not be artistic). In other words, we should pay attention to WHO is speaking, not merely to the words.

—Tossing Socialists in the Air in Romania (2010) is the first of your series of the communist works. What triggered you at that very first stage?

I was a university student when the Iraq War was about to become the global matter right after the September 11 attacks. One of those restless nights I was watching a rerun of The collapse of Ceausescu Administration—Seven days of the revolution filmed by citizens from the NHK documentary archives series. This documentary film taken by two amateur cameramen during the revolution of 1989 motivated me. I was extremely shocked by this film at that moment. Because I saw another reality which I have not known before and it was absolutely different from my reality in Tokyo. In a sense the two worlds were somehow connected by land and this fact made me excited. The first thing I did was to google for art centres in Romania. I found an organisation called "Pavilion" that runs Bucharest Biennale by chance, and obviously I contacted them straight away. Since I didn't know anything about the art scene in Romania, I desperately explained my previous and on-going projects to them. Luckily I received a message suggesting me to come to Bucharest as soon as possible. After that, in 2008 when I got a chance to visit to Germany, I traveled to Bucharest. I remember it was hopelessly hot and stuffy. I was asked to do a talk show right after I got there. I gave a brief talk regarding my performance project in Germany at the national theatre of Romania. Many reporters of TV and radio came to interview me...this is how my first contact with Romania happened.

—A scene from a TV documentary program that you watched by chance became a linkage between you and Romania. It must have been a fatalistic moment for you. And that enthusiasm also led you to Romania once again. You have done a project concerning communism in Moscow as well. Can you tell me when you came up with serialising this project?

After I came back from Romania, I couldn't stop thinking about the communist party in Bucharest. I thought it would be interesting if I could do something irritating but at the same time, paying respects to them. Well then, I came up with the idea of tossing members of the communist party in the air and talked to people of the art centre about this. They showed a positive reaction to my idea and they were like let's do it right now! However I spent almost two years to make it happen. When I was working on the project Tossing Socialists in the air in Romania in 2010, I couldn't imagine myself doing series of works concerning ideologies such as communism and socialism. I just began the project in order to examine the incredible distance between the history of Romania prior/after the Romanian Revolution (1989) and the reality that I'm facing in Japan. Just after that in 2012 when I showed my project Looking for Vladimir Lenin at Moscow Apartments in a group show in Moscow, I got a feeling that my response and reaction to the history and remnants of the communist parties which still exist around the world since 2010s can be a series of works tracking the history of socialism and communism in the world. This feeling led me to work on two projects in a row in Japan Celebrating Karl Marx's Birthday With the Japanese Communist Party (2013) and Proposing to Hold Up Karl Marx to the Japanese Communist Party (2013).

—In the video that documented the project Tossing Socialists in the air in Romania, the distance between the Socialist and young folks is obvious. How do you see the situation after the Romanian Revolution?

I could realise the project Tossing Socialists in the air in Romania when I participated in the artist-in-residence programme of the Pavilion Unicredit for the group show "Utopia of Exotic". The curator was Romanian guy; Andrei Craciun, 22 years old (as of 2010). He was also from the generation who don't know the revolution. There were several political parties that introduced themselves as the Communist Party, but they were small and their activities were minor as none of them had seats in the Parliament. Moreover, "Communist Party" had been illegal in Romania for a long time since the revolution until quite recently. When I got in contact with one of them, they were not even counted as an official political party, and they were just a voluntary organisation. They had to hide themselves in a tiny room of a bar to carry out their political activities safely. Furthermore, the aging of the members were serious problem and most of them were on the brink of their retirement age, it was terrible.

—The silent presence of the socialist who was being tossed in the air was very impressive. Do you intentionally ask questions that make him quiet?

At the scene of tossing Alexandru Matei in the air finally I witnessed one end of discontinuity between generation before and after the revolution. As in the case of Japan, there was a great disconnection apparently in feeling things, or a difficulty to share between the younger generation who were born after the war and the elder who have experienced the war. The word makes no sense in the face of the experience. When I was shooting the video, I managed to ask essential and simple questions, but also I tried to ask absurd questions that people normally don't ask or questions such as "When can you make a revolution happen?", which put them in a quandary. I thought that most people in Romania, are really hard to escape from their experiences because they tend to equalise the correctness of ideology and the nostalgia for their life under the Ceausescu Administration, and in many cases they glorify their past or remember only the worst part of their past. On that point, we should investigate where the ideology or the belief that we have come from.

—In the project Looking for Vladimir Lenin at Moscow Apartments (2012) you searched for replicas of Lenin's statue, which evokes an atmosphere of a mystery novel. Lenin's replicas are still in their private spaces, which shows that the huge shadow of Lenin haunts over people in Moscow.

For people in Moscow the statue of Lenin is not just a replica; it is the "real thing" that was made in the time of Soviet. That statue itself is a product of the Soviet era, and traveled beyond time to Russia.

The memory regarding Vladimir Lenin is not for a particular person, but it is the country itself, a big narrative shared with all the people who lived in the Soviet era. People in Moscow are talkative and they are free to express their own feelings. When I was on the subway transporting a statue of Vladimir Lenin, someone offered me a seat and told me to make Lenin sit even though it was so crowded. Maybe the person just wanted to help me out because I was holding a quite big statue. To be specific I searched for statues of Lenin in places where people actually live, such as kitchens and bedrooms. No one would know about the statues of Lenin that are left behind in private spaces, they are even forgotten by the owners. Because of the regulation back in the Soviet era, I still needed a permission for video recording in most of place or inside public buildings such as railway stations. I guess this manner is a remnant from the days of the Soviet era, but fortunately I could get the permission easily via the Moscow Museum of Modern Art. Nevertheless security guards interrupted and conducted me away while I was recording video in a railway station.

—All the people in Moscow love and believe in Lenin. The revolutionist had his charismatic personality. The soundscape of the city holds a melancholy mood.

The highlight of my video shooting in Moscow is a brief encounter with Mr. Sergey who closely resembles Vladimir Lenin. He works as an automotive maintenance worker, but one day when he was looking at a mirror he finds out that he looks exactly the same as Vladimir Lenin. Since then he decided to become Lenin, and to do so he dressed and shaved like Lenin and stepped out into downtown. He behaved like Lenin did and treated people as Lenin would have treated them. He always carries a medical certification to tell that he doesn't have a mental problem. He has been followed and asked by police officers for several times because of what he was doing, and he had to give a proof that he is not an insane, he visited psychiatrist to get this certification. It is not possible for Sergey to reexperience and relive the life of Vladimir Lenin. However, he started a new phase of his life as "Lenin", and somehow his appearance seemed extraordinary to me. As seen in the video, you hear voices of Moscow people talking simultaneously that it might sound like dissonant music. At the group show in Moscow, I was terribly busy and had to spend a whole day to respond to interviewers from Russia and other countries. By the way, when my father saw my works in Japan, he misunderstood that I became a communist. He is a curious person who still talks that all of European countries are under Socialism. Maybe it is a sign telling me he is getting old.

—In the project Celebrating Karl Marx's Birthday With the Japanese Communist Party (2013), you celebrated Marx's 195th birthday in Japan. A minute revolution happened at a moment when the candles suddenly flared up. Also, the stretched-up singing voices sounded like a primitive mystic word. How did you come up with the idea of celebrating a birthday party for Marx?

Every organisation has its own birthday as everybody does. After I experienced working in Romania and Moscow, naturally I was getting to pay attention to the Japanese Communist Party. While I was working on the project for the group show of "Roppongi Crossing 2013" at the Mori Art Museum, I visited the central committee of the Japanese Communist Party and other branches such as a branch in Okazaki-city located in Aichi prefecture. Then I deliberately tried to connect the origin of the Japanese Communist Party with Karl Marx. I tried to organise the birthday party of Karl Marx, who is an indispensable figure for every member of the communist party even in Japan. I assumed that the participants of the party couldn't deny this fact and their awkward behaviors made them look like comedy actors. I thought because I did on-the-spot interviews, they might mix their public stances and real intentions. You During my interview I abruptly mentioned about the birthday party of Karl Marx and they got frozen for a while, this wavering moment was what I became curious. In my video I included the process of organising the birthday party as well, because I wanted to show not only the party, but also the reactions of people who were involved in this project. A birthday party for a dead man is ridiculous enough, and gives a sense of void and helplessness. Actually we lit 195 candles on a custom-made cake, and we sang a "Happy Birthday" song with members of the Japanese Communist Party. That small room was filled with smoke and that cake was melted by heat.

—In the project Proposing to Hold Up Karl Marx to the Japanese Communist Party (2013), you walked the streets while holding the portrait of Marx. How do the Japanese communists feel about Karl Marx? More specifically, does the existence of Marx function similarly to the presence of the Japanese Emperor under the symbolic emperor system, which subsume to nullify the reality now-here within its enclosed unique dogma?

The last leader of the Soviet Union Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachov gave a statement to the effect that "Japan is the most successful socialist country". In my opinion one of the reasons for his understanding is the almost mono-racial Japanese society that majority of people share the same language and values, and this aspect created totalitarian and mutual surveillance society. This situation of the Japanese society might appear strange to the individualism societies such as Romania and Russia. In Japan unlike most individualism societies that stand on negotiations and competitions, the most important thing is to be aware of and appreciate the obscure things that arise spontaneously in relations with others. Consequently it is not too much to say that Japanese people are warier about issues regarding ideology than any other societies. In addition, the Japanese communists have a tendency to adeptly translate the concept of communism that was formed in the West into the advantageous form to Japanese culture and history. Their way of speaking is generally ambiguous, because they converted what they have felt and perceived into more objective and specific forms, which is well suited to the Japanese society. What do they aim at? They might be no more than an organisation that criticises the government. Originally the Japanese Communist Party was established based on the ideology of Marx-Leninism, but nowadays they don't use Marxism terms anymore and they have replaced by Scientific Socialism terms. They explained that they are no longer using names of specific figures such as Marx or Lenin to express ideologies. I can understand that they pay special attention to their political position and public's view about the party. But I'm irritated and disappointed by seeing them well adapted to the Japanese society. Even the Japanese Communist Party prioritises what have arisen in relations with others than their ideology. However, this is very typical Japanese manner.

—Looking back on your shows in Romania, Russia, and Japan, how do you describe Marx and communism? Why do you think the term “revolution” makes no sense to Japanese people? Is it just a mere fancy that the portrait of Marx appeared something just like a pop icon?

The Eastern European countries such as Romania and Russia have the experience of success in I thought establishing the socialist state (or in a sense the experience of failure). This is the firm truth. Moreover, this fact has even etched in the personal histories of people living in this region. When the personal experience overlaps “the history of nation state”, I believe it’s difficult to separate them. On the other hand, Japan never has succeeded in establishing a socialist state. So to speak, Japanese people have never implemented any socialist revolution. For this lack of political experiences, every discussion regarding political issue by Japanese people is not much more than a desk theory. And moreover, most Japanese people don’t evoke communism by seeing a picture of Karl Marx (but that’s not the main point). And in most of cases, they think of Karl Marx and communism as a thing of the past or something happening in a distant land (not too much to say that they consider these affairs irrelevant to themselves). So I thought Japanese like me can face up to the reality and the history of communism without being pessimistic.

—Do the works of “Communism Series” present an alternative world-view as against globalising capitalism? Hereafter, what do you see as your next vision?

Probably I was able to travel into the history of former socialist states so called dystopia and was able to experience impossibilities of social utopia. In my opinion, to think of communism or utopias that have existed in the past, requires stirring the imagination and thinking of the relation between the individual – minimum unit of free-will – and the society. And this perspective is essential for developing ideal system of nation state such as capitalism or democracy from now on, and also the idea should be updated constantly. At this point, it is prime task to think over again the present state and evolvement of “democracy” from the Japanese point of view, which is a widely shared value between people all over the world.