

# Into the Atomic Sunshine: Shinya Watanabe's New York and Tokyo Exhibition on Post-War Art Under Article 9

Jean Miyake Downey, Shinya Watanabe

**Into the Atomic Sunshine: Shinya Watanabe's New York and Tokyo Exhibition on Post-War Art Under Article 9**

**Shinya Watanabe talks with Jean Downey**



**Postwar Japanese Art under Peace Constitution Article 9**

The exhibit was in [Tokyo](#) from August 6-24, 2008. An exhibit is also planned for Okinawa in 2009.

*"Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes. (2) In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized."* Article 9, Japanese

## Constitution

For sixty years, Article 9, the Japanese Constitution's Peace Clause, has played a critical role in Japanese politics, in US-Japan relations, and may have served as a brake on nuclear arms proliferation in East Asia. The English-language media, however, has paid scant attention to the issue, and most Americans have never heard of it.

Shinya Watanabe sought to heighten American awareness on these issues by bringing ["Into the Atomic Sunshine: Post-War Art under Japanese Peace Constitution Article 9,"](#) an art exhibition that included two artists censored in Japan, to [the Puffin Room Gallery](#), in the SoHo district of Manhattan, in January and February 2008.

The Japanese-born, New York City-based curator might easily be typecast as a spiky-haired, young Japanese interested only in manga and hip clothing, but he is, instead, an intellectual deeply engaged with the world. The impetus behind his exhibitions goes back to a life-transformative period at the age of twenty, while an economics student at Senshu University. When Watanabe traveled throughout Asia on holiday, many elder people he met invited him for meals, and then began talking to him about their traumatic experiences under Japanese colonial rule and war. Becoming aware of history he had not learned in his Japanese high school, he began to focus on the relationships between international economics and war, and the effects of European modernism on Asia, especially as reflected in artistic expression.

After graduation, he spent a year studying economics at the University of Illinois, and then received an MA in Visual Art Administration from New York University.

As a curator, he has committed to exploring critical public issues, especially the historical relationships among nation-building, militarism, colonialism, and war, and to exploring the possibilities of a more peaceful world order. His master's thesis examined the influence of nation states on art, looking at Yugoslavia after the collapse of the USSR and became his first exhibition, "Another Expo: Beyond the Nation-State," which opened in Japan on August 15, 2005, the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II.

I met Watanabe at the Puffin Room, a socially engaged public art space overflowing with historical and contemporary reminders of the pervasiveness of war in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Prior to "Into the Atomic Sunshine," the gallery exhibited Dorothea Lange's photographs of the Japanese American incarceration from [Linda Gordon's](#) and Gary Okihiro's book, *Impounded*. "Shock and Awed," Puffin's permanent exhibition of Iraqi children crayon depictions of "Operation Iraqi Freedom," was concurrently displayed on the lower-level gallery.

After a tour of the exhibition, Watanabe and I continued our conversation at the home of New York-based Greek artist, Lydia Venieri, whose "No Evil" series will be exhibited in Tokyo this spring. Her huge photographs on satin depict the eyes of dolls reflecting not playroom scenes, but instead [images of state-perpetrated global violence](#). Under their disturbing gaze, we talked with a Greek guest about similarities between Japan and Greece - their mythologies, their landscapes of mountains and sea, and past CIA manipulation of their political systems. The backdrops of our dialogue, from the Puffin Room to the artist's loft, where transnational artists spoke of U.S. military

involvement of their countries in perpetual war, and their desire for an alternative international order, resonated with issues that concern millions of people, not only in Japan, but also around the globe.

These are not new issues, of course. Ordinary citizens in Japan, particularly in Okinawa, have grappled with the consequences of the U.S. military presence in Asia and the Pacific from the start of the Cold War, when the U.S. first sought to eliminate Article 9. [When unindicted, Class-A war criminal Kishi Nobusuke became prime minister with American support](#) in 1957, he vowed to abolish Article 9. Yet popular resistance to this and subsequent attacks on Article 9 kept the Constitution intact even as Japan expanded its military power within the framework of U.S. hegemony. In 2006, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, as if resurrecting the half-century-old promise of Kishi, his grandfather, announced he would overturn Japan's Peace Constitution within five to six years. Before being voted out of office, he spearheaded legislation that would lay the groundwork to revise the constitution. Thus far, however, remilitarization has proceeded within the framework of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty without constitutional revision. [The Japanese military budget, at \\$41.1 billion, is presently the sixth largest in the world](#), and the Japanese government pays most of the costs of the ninety-one U.S. military bases in Japan, while Japan's own Self-Defense Forces number 240,000. In 1992, legislators authorized SDF participation in UN peacekeeping missions, and in 2004, the government unconstitutionally deployed six hundred troops to Iraq as "peacekeepers" while refueling U.S. and allied ships in the Persian Gulf.

Detractors in both Japan and the United States argue that Article 9 was a postwar American creation imposed upon Japan, an issue that remains controversial. What is certain, however, is that Article 9 was passionately embraced and safeguarded by Japanese people,

who have often been criticized for not confronting Second World War history. Has their support for Article 9 been a quiet, unmovable statement unheard by most Americans and others who are unaware of the Japanese Constitution's Peace Clause?

Although its letter and spirit have been stretched over six decades, Article 9 and Japanese civil society's support for its pacifistic principles continue to check the government's militaristic ambitions. Article 9 stands in the way of the export of weapons, the possession, production and import of nuclear weapons (the three non-nuclear principles), and the deployment of the SDF abroad for active combat. To underscore the last point, supporters repeat that Japanese troops have not killed a single person overseas since the Second World War, in sharp contrast to the succession of Japanese wars over the previous half century.

In response to the heightened attacks on Article 9 that began under Abe's predecessor, Koizumi Junichiro, democratic activists, across diverse sectors of Japanese society, have mobilized in recent years. In 2004, eminent Japanese scholars and writers, including novelist and activist [Oda Makoto](#), philosopher [Tsurumi Shunsuke](#), and Nobel laureate Oe Kenzaburo founded [The Article Nine Association \(Kyujo no Kai\)](#). American filmmaker John Junkerman, participant in the "Into the Atomic Sunshine" discussion platform and director of the 2005 ["Japan's Peace Constitution,"](#) noted that popularization of Article 9 has begun to spread, as the result of [spontaneous grassroots support](#) inside and outside of Japan. (See [a Japan Focus article](#) on the subject.) In 2005, [the Peace Boat](#), a Japanese peace, human rights, and environmental NGO, and the [Japanese Lawyers International Solidarity Association \(JALISA\)](#) organized [the Global Article 9 Campaign](#), now supported by over sixty Japanese civil society organizations, and hundreds of NGOs

worldwide. In May 2008, the ["Global Article 9 Conference to Abolish War"](#) will convene in Tokyo.

Understandably, Japanese artists have critically addressed issues of war and peace throughout the postwar period. In the 1990's, several artists were censored in Japan because their unflinching artistic criticisms of imperial Japan's wartime record raised the ire of right-wing groups that used violent intimidation tactics against the galleries, museums and communities that sought to present the artists and their work. In order to work without inhibition, some artists, including [Berlin-based Yoshiko Shimada](#), moved abroad. Others, such as Oura Nobuyuki, featured in the "Into the Atomic Sunshine" exhibition, had to change careers. In 1995, Yanagi Yukinori became the first fine artist to specifically address Article 9. Watanabe included his installation, "The Forbidden Box," in the "Into the Atomic Sunshine exhibition" as a tribute to his groundbreaking and provocative work.

The content of the other late twentieth and early twenty-first century artworks Watanabe selected for this show also reverberate images of national identity, political theater, imperialism, war, dehumanized "Others," and the universal yearning for peace. Watanabe chose not only Japanese but also American, European, and Latino artists, most with transnational backgrounds, who combine issues that may seem disparate at first glance. These artists confront European, American, and Japanese colonialism, wartime atrocities, the atomic bombings, and Okinawa's precarious history as a military colony under two empires. Many of their works juxtapose and layer imagery to reflect historical interlinkages that have become obscured over time and mirror the complex nature of individual and collective consciousness.



### Shitamichi Motoyuki, "Untitled (Torii)"

Photographer Shitamichi Motoyuki's haunting photographs of colonial-era Shinto shrine remains in Japan's former colonies graphically remind viewers that, only six decades ago, millions of people throughout Asia were forced to worship shrine and emperor under *Kouminka* (imperial citizen forming) policies. Morimura Yasumasa's videowork "Season of Passion - A Requiem: MISHIMA" brings an unexpected and uncanny twist to Mishima Yukio's speech at his failed 1970 coup d'état attempt. Watanabe included this work partly because Mishima also called for the abolition of Article 9.

In their 2007 "Unrealizable Goals," videowork filmed at Kita-Kyushu, the initial target of the Nagasaki bombing, Jennifer Allora & Guillermo Calzadilla, shake up habitual images that portray military presence in Okinawa and the revision of Article 9 as "normal." The Puerto Rican artists previously cast [their artistic gaze on Vieques](#), the Puerto Rican island, with a history of weapons testing and passionate protest analogous to Okinawa's.

Tokyo-based, Belgian artist [Eric van Hove](#) also refers to Okinawa in his installation, "Japanese Constitution Worm Autodafe." In addition, this conceptual work addresses [the suppression of dissent in Japan](#), alluding to book burnings

during the Spanish Inquisition, the Third Reich, and the rule of Chinese statesman Li Si. Okinawan-born, New York-based [Teruya Yuken](#)'s subversive "Upside-Down Hinomaru" humorously examines equating identity with a flag.

Watanabe commissioned American [Vanessa Albury](#)'s "Your Fears, My Hopes" specifically for "Into the Atomic Sunshine." Albury's work aims to focus attention on shared collective and individual trauma, and, like Yoko Ono's "Play It By Trust," the centerpiece of the exhibition, reflects a yearning for healing from the wounds of war-filled world history we all have inherited and must work out together, and a longing to somehow transform the violent mental and emotional attitudes that result in the creation of weapons, soldiers, military-industrial states, and war.

----

**JD:** *How did you conceive the Article 9 exhibition?*

**SW:** Article 9 is one of the biggest issues in Japan, but most people outside of Japan are not aware of its importance. Therefore, I started to think about creating an exhibition about Article 9 and Japanese postwar art. I wanted to facilitate communication between people who wrote the constitution and people who wanted to discuss its relevance in contemporary Japan.

I know both countries, Japan and the United States, where I have lived more than six years. The international atmosphere of New York seemed conducive to the openness of this project. I always try to curate a show which only I can curate. If I don't do it, no one will do it.

**JD:** *You took the title of this exhibition, "Into the Atomic Sunshine" from a remark made by General Courtney Whitney at the 1946 conference that created the Japanese constitution. Whitney, head of the Occupation's*



*Government Section and a key figure in drafting the Constitution, told a Japanese translator, "We have been enjoying your atomic sunshine." The conference was actually nicknamed the "Atomic Sunshine" conference. What do you think Whitney meant by this charged combination of words?*

**SW:** General Whitney's comment made it clear to the Japanese who was the winner and the loser of the war. He remarked that accepting the GHQ draft would be the best way to keep the emperor "secure" and made plain that if the Japanese government did not accept this plan, then General MacArthur would propose it directly to the Japanese people.

**JD:** *You did more than curate an exhibition around the concept of Article Nine. There were a series of events organized around the exhibition as well. Why did you choose these events?*

**SW:** Before curating an exhibition, I always organize a discussion event, which I call a "platform." I got this idea from Documenta 11, the large art exhibition in Kassel, Germany. Its Nigerian curator, Okwui Enwezor, holds "platforms" to create common ground to discuss issues he addresses, such as colonialism.

Before curating this exhibition, I wanted to discuss Article 9 and its meaning. The discussion helped me to find ways to curate the exhibition from multiple perspectives, both inside and outside of Japan's borders.

The film screening of Steven Okazaki's *White Light, Black Rain* was significant. This was the first documentary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki broadcast on American television. It broadly familiarized Americans with the reality of the atomic bombings.

After the film screening, the *Vangelina Theater* performed Butoh, a contemporary

dance form recognized worldwide as an important artistic expression that emerged from Japanese postwar culture. To see the Butoh performance by an American troupe right after the documentary of the atomic bombings was very powerful.

The live music event featured Miho Hatori, a member of the musical groups, Gorillaz and Cibo Matto. I asked Miho-san to sing songs from Okinawa, since Okinawa's current situation as an island of American bases now administered by Japan interconnects with Article 9. She sang "*Chinsaguno Hana*", a beautiful Okinawan folk song. Music is an easy tool to access younger audiences. I am happy if any audience member became interested in the culture or history of Okinawa through this event.

**JD:** *How did you choose the artists for the exhibition? Were all the artists supporters of Article Nine?*

**SW:** Not necessarily. I included some artists and artworks directly focusing on that issue, including Yukinori Yanagi, Eric van Hove, and Allora & Calzadilla. But other works demonstrated the historical context of Article 9 and the circumstances of Article 9's creation, or reflected the philosophy of Article 9.



Oura Nobuyuki, "Holding Perspectives"

**JD:** *The most controversial artist in the exhibition is Oura Nobuyuki, who was censored*

by the Toyama Museum in 1990. Oura's "Holding Perspective" series of images juxtaposes photographs of the Showa Emperor as a child, a young adult tipping a top hat in a convertible, and as an old man, superimposed on traditional Japanese scrolls depicting a farming village, a Buddhist mandala, and tattooed yakuza bodies, juxtaposed with images of very disturbing wartime images.

After a successful 1986 exhibition that included this series, the museum purchased four pieces from Oura, and, in 1990, republished a catalog from that exhibition. It was the year the emperor died. The controversy started when a local Shinto priest publicly ripped the catalog apart at the Toyama Library. Then in 1993 a right-wing campaign began which succeeded in forcing the museum to burn its undistributed catalogues. The museum also sold the Oura works it had purchased earlier. In 1994, Oura filed a suit against Toyama Prefecture, demanding that the museum repurchase the works and republish the catalog. In 2000, the Nagoya High Court overturned a 1998 lower court ruling in favor of Oura that had ordered the Toyama Museum to pay damages. The Supreme Court, however, rejected Oura's appeal later that year.

Your exhibition catalog describes Oura's work not as an attack on Emperor Showa, as ultranationalists charged, but rather an investigation and critique of Japan's modern, especially postcolonial, history. In fact, Oura describes the series as a "self portrait," implying that his work was a self-critique as a Japanese citizen.

You also assess Oura's importance not only in terms of artistic resistance, but also as a bellwether of political resistance against the revival of ultranationalists calling for the re-deification of the emperor. Oura and his supporters have held countless meetings, published pamphlets, articles, and books, and have "raised the level of political awareness

among artists and writers, all of which sounded a warning against the conservative revival."

Oura isn't able to exhibit in Japan anymore because he's so controversial. Where does he live and exhibit now?

**SW:** He no longer works as a fine artist. Instead, he has become a filmmaker in Tokyo.

His recent film "[9.11-8.15 Nippon Suicide Pact](#)" is about postwar Japan and its relationship with other countries. This film follows many historically important figures. In one of my favorite scenes Shigenobu Mei, (the daughter of Japanese Red Army member, Shigenobu Fusako, and a Palestinian activist), visits the house of South Korean poet Kim Chi-Ha, who opposed the Park dictatorship, and was imprisoned in 1976. Kim was liberated during the 1981 Kwangju Democratization Movement, after pleas of international authors including Jean-Paul Sartre and Oe Kenzaburo. This documentary contains comments by one of his petitioners Tsurumi Shunsuke, philosopher and activist in *Beheiren*, the Japan Peace-for-Vietnam Citizen's Alliance, a popular grassroots movement against the Vietnam War, during the 1960s and 1970s, that was led by novelist and activist Oda Makoto.

Oura is still active as a film director, but the "Oura Incident" itself is not known outside of Japan, so I wanted to draw attention to it.

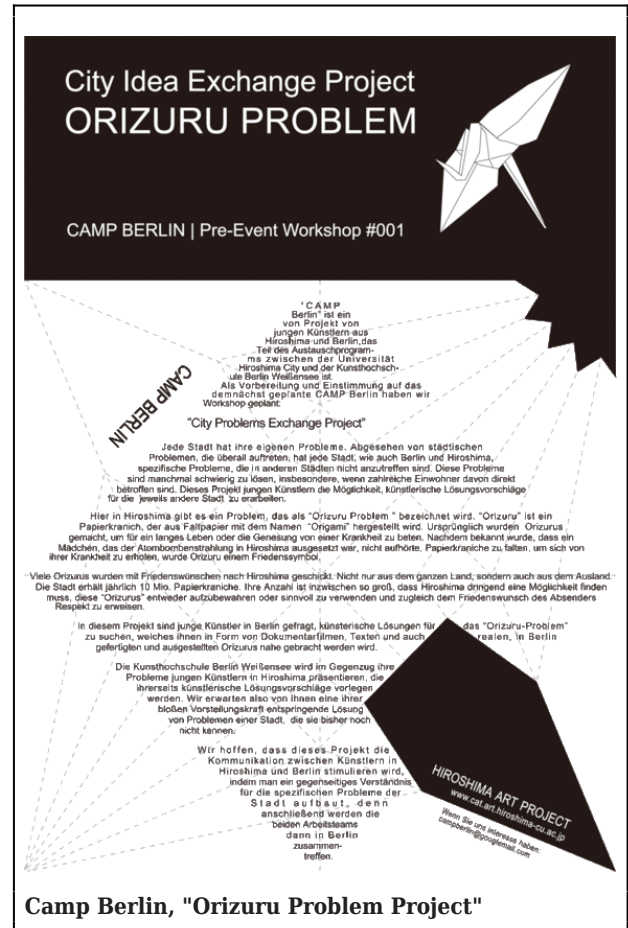


**"The Forbidden Box" by Yanagi Yukinori**  
(Photo by Takamatsu Yuka)

**JD:** Yanagi Yukinori was also censored in the 1990's by a gallery in Japan because of a series of prints that dealt with imperial identity and official discrimination against Korean nationals.

His work has a strong transnational and universal orientation. He is from Fukuoka, and said that living so close to Korea while growing up formed his concept of porous borders. Does he exhibit in Japan now?

**SW:** Yes, he is active in Hiroshima, and recently finished an exchange project "Camp Berlin" involving artists in Hiroshima and Berlin.



**JD:** The exhibition "Camp Berlin," was held in February, 2008 as the first part of an ongoing cultural exchange project -- the Hiroshima Art Project 2008, between the Hiroshima City University and the School of Art and Design Berlin-Weissensee. The artists focus on Hiroshima and Berlin as cities that have both generated and accepted large numbers of immigrants throughout their histories. Specifically, in the period before the Asia Pacific War, many in Hiroshima immigrated to Hawaii and Latin America, and many Koreans were brought to Hiroshima. In recent years, Brazilian-Japanese have returned to Hiroshima.

**SW:** A project which I am especially interested in is the recycling of *orizuru* (origami cranes). Because of the story of Sadako and the thousand cranes, Hiroshima-City receives millions of *orizuru* from all over Japan and



abroad every year. However, the city government, not knowing how to store this tremendous number of *orizuru*, secretly burned them. Mr. Yanagi, who was interested in how German artists came to terms with postwar history, asked what they thought the best way would be to recycle these *orizuru*.

The German artists came up with some recycling plans, but these plans have not yet materialized. Mr. Yanagi felt the ideas of German artists were not yet profound enough, because of the difficulty in grasping the massive quantity of *orizuru*. At the same time, this is above all a cultural exchange project. So if German artists are able to dialogue with Japanese artists about the issue of Hiroshima's *orizuru*, then the project is already successful.



Orizuru cranes

**JD:** Yanagi's *"The Forbidden Box"* uses a box as a symbol merging the Greek myth of Pandora's Box with the Japanese folktale, "*Urashima Taro*." He explained that he wanted to invoke a sense of universalism in this piece: "In our travels around the globe and living in different cultures, I have found it hopeful to learn that the myths and legends which we transmit to our children through the 'folk' or 'fairy' tales we share with them, have universally common themes no matter whether the stories originate in Asia, Europe, Africa, or the Americas. This universality of children's tales enables us to

*know that we, as a species, share common core values and hopes all around the globe. From this we can learn anew that we are sisters and brothers who share a fragile globe, and that we must care for one another and our dear 'Mother Earth.'*" Yanagi said his work also embodies an allegory for modern Japan, that the atomic bombings opened a Pandora's Box of human tragedy and a chain of historical events that unexpectedly included a "hope" for Japan's future: Article 9.

**SW:** Yanagi Yukinori creates beautiful, yet controversial works which refer to postwar Japanese history, encompassing issues of the imperial system, the fear of nuclear weapons, Japan's relationships with North and South Korea, and also Article 9.

In 1995, to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, the Queens Museum in New York City hosted an exhibition called "Project Article 9." For this exhibition, Yanagi superimposed two 17-foot-long fabric panels, one printed with the image of a mushroom cloud above an opened box engraved with the name, "Little Boy," the name of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. On the front panel, he printed the original draft of Article 9, as a blurred image. There is an image of the mushroom cloud on the fabric, also.

Mr. Yanagi evokes the image of Japan as a victim of atomic bombings, but he never forgets that Japan was also an aggressor. His work, "Asia-Pacific Ant Farm," for example, consists of thirty-six clear boxes in which ants crawl through colored sand depicting the flags of the "Great East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere" nations, evoking Japan's colonial past.

"The Forbidden Box" is the first fine art collaborative work between American art institutions - the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia - and a Japanese artist focused on the atomic bombings. By using a process of collaboration involving descendants from both sides, Yanagi confirmed art as a method of



communication across historical barriers, during the 1990's, when the issue of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was very controversial, as the cancellation of the Enola Gay Exhibition at the Smithsonian demonstrated.

The "hope" that you mention reflects the "hope" of atomic bombing survivor anti-nuclear activists who strive to assure that there will be no future victims of nuclear bombings. Article 9 is a renunciation of war, whose premise is that Japan must never again be responsible for the creation of more war victims.

**JD:** *The cancellation of the Smithsonian atomic bomb exhibit reminds us that censorship of representations of World War II has occurred on both sides of the Pacific, and that neonationalist pressure is by no means restricted to Japan.*

*This exhibition, which was to open in 1995, was to include the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, while providing the human context of the bombing, showing its impact on people – both Japanese and Americans. The planned exhibit included atomic bomb artifacts such as the carbonized lunch box of a twelve year girl that illustrated the human consequences of the bombing. Such exhibits, raising questions about the use of the bomb to target civilians and implying alternatives to its use, catalyzed outcries from veterans' and other groups that touched off a firestorm in the Congress and the press. Martin Harwit, the curator of the exhibition at the Smithsonian, was forced to resign and wrote about his experiences in a 1996 book *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of the Enola Gay*. Did Yanagi experience comparable censorship?*

**SW:** When Yanagi created this artwork for the 1995 exhibition "Project Article 9" at the Queens Museum, during the Q&A of the artist's talk, American veterans harshly questioned him. I respect Yanagi as an artist, and value

this history, so I decided to include this artwork in my exhibition.

**JD:** *Yoko Ono's "White Chess Set," first conceived in 1966, and also known as "Play It By Trust," is the center of your exhibition. There are no black chess pieces, only white pieces, thereby eliminating the idea of an opponent or "enemy." As the players get further in to the game, it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish whose pieces are whose. The idea of "us" and "them" becomes erased. You wrote in the exhibition catalog that Yoko Ono was the first artist to "invert the notion of chess, to make it a metaphor for peace, rather than a game of conflict." This conceptual artwork is better known as "Play It By Trust," renamed for a 1987 tribute version created for the 75th birthday of composer John Cage. Would you speak about it and Ono's involvement with Article Nine and peace activism?*



Yoko Ono, "White Chess Set"

**SW:** To be honest, I do not know her exact opinion on Article 9. However, her "Peace Art" aims at perfect and absolute peace, which is completely different from any other artist I know.

First of all, chess is a war strategy game. When the Great Tokyo Air Raid took place in March 1945, Ono was forced to evacuate from Tokyo to the countryside. She was twelve years old. Before the war, she was transnational, having spent half of her childhood in the United States, because of her family's business.

Having grown up both in Japan and the United States, and having received both Buddhist and Christian education, she was able to acquire a broader worldview, which also appears in this artwork.

I think that [John Lennon's message on peace came from Yoko's influence](#). My understanding is that John Lennon became a media advocate because of Yoko, to help broadcast her message of peace.



Yoko Ono and Shinya Watanabe

**JD:** Would you comment on German-born, San Francisco-based Kota Ezawa's "Who's Afraid of Black, White, and Grey" which draws from the film adaptation of the jarringly violent play by Edward Albee?

**SW:** Ezawa created an animated video work, drawing on the 1966 film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in 2003, just after the beginning of the Iraq war. The film portrayed the marital quarrel between Martha (Elizabeth Taylor) and George (Richard Burton), and how each tried to justify his or her aggression in terms of self-defense.

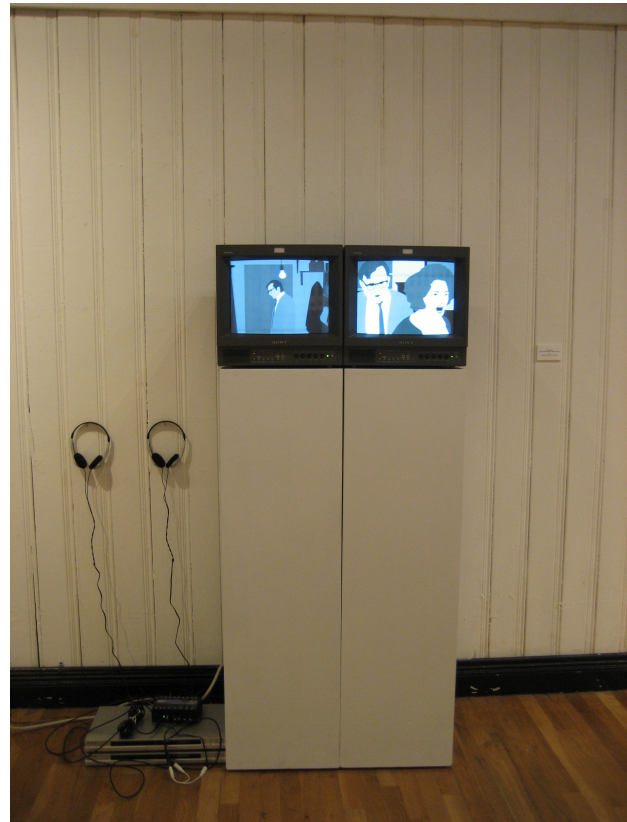
Edward Albee wrote "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" in 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. George and Martha represent George Washington and his wife Martha Washington, and Nick who appears in the film represents Nikita Khrushchev.

The film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* also referenced the 1933 Disney animated film *Three Little Pigs*, known for its theme song "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf," based on the *Grimm Fairy Tale*, which does not have a structure of right and wrong.

The *Three Little Pigs* theme song, "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf" became a best-selling song, mirroring people's resolve to overcome the "big bad wolf" of the Great Depression (the Japanese constitution was written by American New Dealers of this era). When the Nazis began conquering their neighbors, the song also came to reference the dark situation of Europe and Hitler.

Ezawa's title "Black, White and Gray," seems to me to deny the dualism between winner and loser, represented by the colors black and white. Furthermore, black and white are colors that represent racial division, and gray might represent the position of the artist, who was born in Germany to a Japanese father and a German mother.

In the last scene of this video work, when George tries to shoot Martha, an umbrella pops out from the rifle. As the umbrella inflates, the tension deflates.



Kota Ezawa, "Who's Afraid of White, Black, and Grey?" (Photo by Takamatsu Yuka)

**JD:** You chose informed, engaged, and courageous artists who spoke and speak truth to power. Oura did so, with devastating professional consequences. Some Japanese neonationalists have no respect or tolerance for freedom of expression. Do you think they overestimate the power of art? Are artists able to influence or even change society?

**SW:** I think that artists do not have the power to change society, but artists can touch the hearts of individuals, and can influence individual acts. Even across great distances, the message of the artist can reach individuals. That is the power of art.

The job of the artist in society is to speak about ideals. In this way, for example, John Lennon did important work in creating the song "Imagine." That was a perfect message about ideals, and it was a message to the people, that touched many individually.



Now, because of inhibitions from the commercial art market that artists must deal with, artists face limitations in opportunities to express real ideals. But as long as the artist works as an artist, I believe that the artist will talk about societal ideals, and I want to work with these artists.

**JD:** *I see what you're doing as critical curating. Your worldview actually seems alt-global, and the artists you work with are fine artists, but they hold critical and alternative perspectives.*

**SW:** I think so. I am also drawn to the universal. The twentieth century was a century of war, dominated by a very *idée*-oriented, male-oriented society. I think the twentieth-first century needs to be more universal, *khora*-oriented, and somehow more feminine.

I think of modernism itself as negentropy (saving information in an efficient way). This negentropy of modernism appears as the microchip, nuclear power plants, or nuclear weapons. These are examples of the mindset of modernism that reached its zenith in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The nation-state is also a product of modernist thought.

I wanted to show alternative philosophical approaches that can help us overcome the type of thinking that characterizes modernism, which was created mainly from Cartesian philosophy.

**JD:** *Would you talk a little about postwar Japanese art and how it differs from prewar art?*

**SW:** First of all, in Japan, people often use the word "postwar," meaning after 1945. However, in the United States, the word "postwar" is less common, and the English speaker needs to specify something like "post-World War II." After the defeat of World War II, Japan's entire social system drastically changed.

I like the word "postwar," since this word implies that war is over permanently. However, the current situation in Japan seems almost like the "prewar," which implies that Japan will be involved in war again.

Postwar Japanese art contains much conceptual artwork, often involving the mixture of Japanese tradition with American influence.

**JD:** *Why did you come to the U.S. to study?*

**SW:** Actually I wanted to go to Germany because I like German philosophy and German history. One of the theorists I draw from include Jurgen Habermas. I would like to pose questions to Jurgen Habermas in a cultural exchange between Germany and Japan, because Habermas' thought demonstrates ways to transcend nationalism. Habermas' basic attitude is constitutional patriotism. By keeping the German constitution, which was written by the UN, Germany became the "real" Germany. This kind of thought reflects Habermas' transcendent form of patriotism.

I thought the position of Habermas, a German intellectual, could be helpful for Japan, but there hasn't been enough communication between the two countries. I wanted to facilitate communication on the topics of the history of empire, nationalism, and the Yasukuni Shrine debate, which is very similar to the German argument, *Historikerstreit* (Historian's Quarrel). This debate among historians in Germany began in the mid-1980's, when Habermas confronted the revisionism of German rightist historians who, in the 1970's, began to argue that Germans should let go of "guilt" and revive national pride.

The reason I came to NYU was that, number one, my English was a lot better than my German, and number two, New York has many artists, and is a very international city.

**KM:** *How did you become a curator?*



**SW:** I wanted to go to art school when I was in high school, but my father ran a small fish company in a rural part of Shizuoka prefecture. If you're born in that kind of fisherman and fish company neighborhood, it makes sense to study economics and continue the business. But since high school, I wanted to be a curator. I was always into music and photography. I also wanted to be a film director.

When I was twenty-years-old, I had a chance to travel all over Asia, seven countries by land, and I tried to make a documentary film about Asia. Automatically, this became a war film. For example, in Malaysia, older people began to talk to me about their war experiences. These older people know they will die soon, and they won't have many chances to speak with a young Japanese person who speaks English.

**JD:** *What did people want to talk about?*

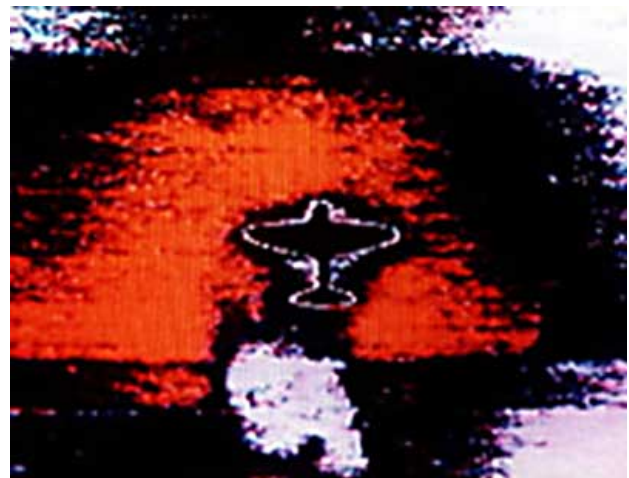
**SW:** They talked about the harsh experience of changing their names into Japanese and being forced to speak and write in Japanese. Japan had a policy of *Kouminka* (Imperial Citizen Forming) as part of creating the *Daitouwa Kyoueiken* (Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere), and the Japanese military forced Asian people to act in these ways. However, Japanese students do not learn much about this in school.

**JD:** *Did you finish the film?*

**SW:** I tried to finish the editing many times. I edited with Sony's VAIO, but the computer was not powerful enough to complete it. On TV, the Sony VAIO commercial said, "If you buy this computer, you can make a film!" But to make a film with this computer was just impossible. So my friend said, "Just forget about your film. Let's watch a good film at Athenée Française."

There, I saw a film by Chris Marker. He is a French director, part of the *Nouvelle Vague* (New Wave), and part of the May 1968 Revolution in France. In 1997 he made a film

called "Level Five," about the Battle of Okinawa. This film is about women putting together information from all over the world into a computer, like the Internet. One woman needs inputs to get from Level One to Level Five. At Level Two, she doesn't have enough information, and the keyword "Okinawa" pops up on the screen. She goes to Okinawa to get more info for the computer. But she could not finish her mission, and she had to turn off the computer. This meant she would die. She said, "I can't complete this. It's impossible."



Chris Marker, "Level Five"

**JD:** *Why?*

**SW:** Because Level One was the beginning of the war, and Level Two was close to genocide, the raping of women, acts like that. And Level Three was worse. In Okinawa, she could not input anymore, because it was too terrible. She said, "It's beyond my imagination. I can't think of this." So she chose her own death instead, turning off the computer.

This was very significant to me. I wanted to complete a war film on Asia myself, but it was just impossible. I thought, "Maybe this can't be done." I also knew that I couldn't make a better film than Chris Marker.

I thought that if I became a curator, I could

introduce very good artwork in certain contexts. I'm good at this. So I decided to become a curator when I was twenty-one.

**JD:** Your interests were so profound at a young age.

**SW:** When I traveled and began making exhibitions, it was almost as if I was driven by some kind of strong will from deep inside of me. In Japanese, this kind of feeling is called "moved by the heart."

**JD:** Do you know exactly what it was moving you? The themes you work with are about universalism, war, and peace.

**SW:** I guess it starts largely from my grandfather's wartime experience. My grandfather was sold to a fisherman's community as a slave. It is a typical story of the 1920's and 1930's, as in "Izu no Odoriko" by Kawabata Yasunari, or poems by Serizawa Koujiro. This experience in my ancestry probably moves me to go to in that direction.

**JD:** You're planning to take this exhibition to Japan. Has there ever been an art exhibition on Article 9 in Japan?

**SW:** There have been exhibitions of "peace" art. However, this would be the first exhibition that includes historically important fine artists

with critical perspectives addressing Article 9. By bringing this exhibition from New York City to Japanese cities, I hope many people will think more about Article 9 in a constructive way.

----

*Spikyart.org*, Shinya Watanabe's website contains more information and photos from "Into the Atomic Sunshine: Post-War Art under Japanese Peace Constitution Article 9." The exhibition catalog, with a detailed history of Article 9, a summary of the discussion platform with participants John Junkerman, neonationalist political critic Suzuki Kunio, Beate Siroto Gordon, and Japanese economics scholar Frances Rosenbluth, and descriptions and photographs of artwork, is available at [Amazon.com](https://amazon.com).

*Jean Miyake Downey*, a lawyer, sociologist and contributing editor for *Kyoto Journal: Perspectives on Asia*, writes on multiculturalism and human rights issues. She conducted this interview for Japan Focus. Posted on March 17, 2008.

See Edan Corkill's extended review of the Tokyo exhibit, "Making art out of Article 9, and his reflections on Japanese artists abroad, [here](#).