

## re: arts

# Making art out of Article 9

Expatriate Japanese curator Shinya Watanabe flirts with taboo

Edan Corkill  
STAFF WRITER

Perhaps there are two types of Japanese people: those who stay in Japan, and those who leave for foreign shores. Distance means the two rarely interact, and it's just as well, because the results can be fiery.

Such was the case in 1986, when the then New York-based, Japanese artist Nobuyuki Oura participated in a group exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Toyama. His contribution was "Holding Perspective," a series of collages, each featuring a cutout photograph of the late Emperor Hirohito. He was shown, for example, tipping a bowler hat among a maze of tattooed bodies.

It was obvious that Oura's Westernized sensibilities had taught him (unless he had been like this from the start) that when it came to art, nothing was sacred.

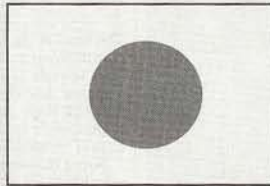
The locals, or at least, their elected representatives, disagreed.

Two months after the exhibition finished, the works were denounced at the Toyama Prefectural Assembly, remaining copies of the exhibition catalog were destroyed and it was removed from circulation at the prefectural library; a few years later, works in the series that had already been acquired by the museum were sold.

Oura's collages have not been shown in an art exhibition in Japan since. But now, 22 years later, they have made a return, and, not surprisingly, it has been orchestrated by another Japanese exile.

Shinya Watanabe is a 28-year-old freelance curator who has been based in New York for the last six years. Since the age of 17, when this Shizuoka Prefecture native made his first overseas jaunt, he has traveled to 34 countries.

Watanabe's story is almost as interesting as that of his latest exhibition, "Into the Atomic Sunshine: Post-War Art Under Japanese Peace Constitution



No, really: Yuken Teruya's "Upside Down Hinomaru" YUKEN TERUYA

## Article 9 verbatim

Brought into effect on May 3, 1947, Article 9's full text states: "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 means of settling international disputes. 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," which collects art related to the problematic article in the Japanese constitution that renounces war and the right to keep armed forces.

"In 2006, (former Prime Minister) Shinzo Abe started talking about the possibility of changing the Japanese Constitution — in other words, Article 9," says Watanabe in explaining why he made the exhibition. "I thought there should be a discussion on this matter."

Before Abe came along, Watanabe's interests — the former Yugoslavia — were as distant from his native country as his New York base. As part of a Master of Arts in Visual Art Administration at New York University, he wrote a thesis on

"The disintegration of Yugoslavia after the crash of the USSR, and the effect of the new nation state and how this structure influenced the value of art."

Prior to that study, Watanabe took a degree in economics at Tokyo's Senshu University ("I didn't have the grades to get into Waseda"), with a year's exchange at the University of Illinois.

"My family has a small business in Shizuoka, so I had to study economics," he says, but by that point his heart was already set on the creative industries.

"A lot of my friends at school were really into music and film. So I was already like a curator. When I bought a photo book of Andy Warhol or something, I would always bring it to school and look at it with friends," he recalls.

Watanabe believed that the path of the budding curator led away from Japan, and, except for the occasional exhibition here, the work looks set to keep him away.

"Japan doesn't have a strong infrastructure to think about constructive arguments. New York is much easier for me to do things. I have more freedom. Sometimes I get a lot of criticism in Japan," he says.

If anything is likely to inspire criticism, it is his current "Atomic Sunshine" exhibition, which runs until Aug. 24 at Daikanyama Hillside Forum. Does he worry that it might be targeted?

"Sometimes, because I will exhibit Oura's Emperor collage. In 1986, 300 rightwingers came to the museum (and the prefectural assembly to complain)," he replies. Still, Watanabe hopes the exhibition does not create a controversy.

"Art doesn't have the power to influence something very strongly," he says, "but it can be like a playground — where a lot of people come together to talk, like scientists, politicians, artists, even part-timers."

Watanabe's exhibition was shown at the Puffin Foundation, a private New York arts organization, earlier this year, and he believes the show is as relevant internationally as it is in Japan.

"Article 9 is an international issue — it is Japan saying to the world that we will never fight against you," he says. "It's very unique."

The exhibition's surprisingly well-constructed catalog includes a long interview with Beate Sirota Gordon, a New Yorker who, while working for the General Headquarters (GHQ) during the Occupation in the late 1940s, helped draft the Japanese Constitution.

"A few among us were legal experts, but most of us were not. They were university professors, bureaucrats, businessmen," Gordon says of the team who drafted the document. Still, their



What a mess! Kota Ezawa's "Who's Afraid of Black, White and Grey" (2003) from the "Atomic Sunshine" exhibition at the Daikanyama Hillside Forum KOTA EZAWA/MURFREY GUY AND HAINES

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**Playing with fire:** Curator Shinya Watanabe and Yoko Ono sit down for a game of "white chess."  
**Left:** A video still from Yasumasa Morimura's "A Requiem: MISHIMA 1970.11.25-2006.4.6."

YUKA TAKAMATSU (above),  
 YASUMASA MORIMURA

intentions were good and, in Gordon's words, Article 9 "was successful for 60 years for Japan. Because of it, for the last 60 years, Japan didn't kill anyone."

That said, Watanabe is uncomfortable when Japan is held up by the United States as an example of "successful nation building."

Particularly now, as the United States struggles with Afghanistan and Iraq, Watanabe wanted to tell them: "OK, now you're writing the Iraqi Constitution. You say that the GHQ did a great job with the Japanese Occupation, so why can't it do so in Iraq? But no, you have to study exactly what happened (in Japan)."

Some of the problems arising from Article 9 are treated in the works of art included in the exhibition.

Joining Oura is another America-based exile, Yoko Ono, who is showing her white chessboard. It forms a

potent metaphor for an "enforced" pacifism: because both players must use white pieces, the more they try to attack each other, the more futile the task becomes.

Yukinori Yanagi, who moved to Hiroshima after living and studying in the United States, provided a work that juxtaposes Article 9 with an earlier version. One version had even renounced the right to self-defense—a clause whose deletion engendered the Self-Defense Forces, not to mention the argument, still continuing to this day, about their constitutionality, extent and role.

Watanabe has also included Yasumasa Morimura's re-creation in video of novelist Yukio Mishima's famous presuicide speech from 1970. While the original speech focused on the problems associated with the Japan-U.S. security pact (itself arguably a consequence of Article 9), Watanabe points out that

Mishima actually argued for "the Japanese Self-Defense Forces to be divided into two. One part for self-defense, and the other to be provided to the United Nations."

Younger artists are represented, too. A video by San Francisco-based Kota Ezawa turns a scene from the 1966 film "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" into a black-and-white animation. A married couple is shown embroiled in a passionate argument, each insisting that the other started it. Even self-defense, the work suggests, is capable of sparking conflict.

About half of the 11 artists in the exhibition are Japanese who are currently or previously based overseas.

Watanabe refuses to predict how the local audience will respond to the show. But some signs are not encouraging.

"I applied to so many Japanese corporations (for sponsorship for the show)—like over 50—and they all said no, because it's too political," he recalls.

In part, the show was made possible by the dedication of Japanese assistants who were prepared to work as volunteers.

"But, almost without exception, they are Japanese who live in foreign countries. They understand art on a global scale. They have the capacity to understand this kind of project," he says.

*"Into the Atomic Sunshine: Post-War Art Under Japanese Peace Constitution Article 9" runs until Aug. 24 at Daikanyama Hillside Forum in Tokyo. For more information visit [www.spikyart.org/atomicssunshine/](http://www.spikyart.org/atomicssunshine/)*