

INTERVIEW BY GUNHILD BORGGREEN JUNE 2003

***...so I wonder how much you identify as a Japanese artist, or you consider yourself an "international" artist without any connections to a specific nation or national culture.***

Since I am doing video and internet art, I see myself more as "International" than "Japanese". The moving picture started in the late 19th century and developed through the 20th - which almost immediately set the character of being international rather than national, though some national characteristics had been unavoidable and in some cases probably even desirable. The invention and development of internet art is even more recent and there are undoubtedly still many issues to be solved. These issues revolve around the genre "internet art". Throughout the 20th century (and especially since World War II) and into the 21st century as we find ourselves today, the sphere of our activities and consciousness has been international rather than national - and I think these two art genres are living proofs of just that. Now, when it comes to internet art, I don't know if we are still preoccupied with so many basic issues and that is why the discussions about national identity has not yet come up, or if the Internet being so international that we never need to go into those discussions even in the future.

So to summarise my answer to your question, yes, I do regard myself more as an "international" artist, but this is not because I've lived in Sweden for almost 16 years but because the genres I do work in tend to be that way. (And moreover, I always regard myself as "me".)

***The reason I ask you is because I am working on a research project concerning the reception of Japanese art in Denmark (as the rest of Scandinavia) in the post-war period, mainly focusing on how exhibitions of Japanese art from Japan (f.ex. organized or sponsored by Japan Foundation) is promoting a special kind of "uniqueness" attached to Japanese culture in general. One part of the project also concerns how Danish (or other Scandinavian) audiences perceive Japanese art, and what kind of images they form in their heads concerning the concept "Japanese art".***

***So I basically would like to know if you personally have had any experience in relation to your own art works and public exhibitions about Scandinavian audiences reflecting on the "Japaneseness" in your works. Is this kind of national identity important for you at all, or perhaps other people impose the importance of this topic onto your works?***

Yes, I have. It was when I was doing installation (between 1991-1995) and also when I showed my computer prints (2000 in Stockholm and again in 2002). I myself don't define my works as "Japanese" or "International" or "Western" or "Swedish/Scandinavian." I often do what my interests take me to when I am doing it. However, various receptions of those works have been very tricky to tackle - if they see any Japanese-ness in my work, they tend to say "oh, you are doing 'Japanese art,'" which means it is classified as "exotic" and never be taken seriously in the art scene; if they don't see any Japanese-ness in it, they literally come up to me and say "why aren't you doing something Japanese?".

A Swedish composer friend of mine once said to me in the '80s: "I don't like Japanese contemporary composers - they just imitate us. Why aren't they doing something Japanese?" Upon hearing that, my immediate response was "Why aren't YOU doing something Swedish? And what is SWEDISH music, by the way?" I also got this comment in the early '90s when everyone in Sweden started buying Japanese cars: "Japanese only imitate what we do" (referring to car production). Upon hearing that, my immediate response was "So SWEDES do NOT imitate? So you mean cars are a SWEDISH invention? So you mean VOLVO and SAAB did not imitate what the British, Americans, French, etc. came up with?" It seems to me that there is an underlying myth about nationalities. People tend to talk about nationalities but what they really mean is "Western heritage" and "Eastern heritage." These two guys undoubtedly thought because modern contemporary music and cars come from other "Western" countries and Sweden being another "Western" country, it is free for Swedes to copy them. But when non-Western countries do exactly what they themselves are doing, they tend to think in terms of "imitation."

Many years have passed since these incidents and there is probably not a single soul even in Sweden who considers Japanese or Korean cars as imitations any longer. However, the underlying attitude still remains: if you are not doing "Western" things, you have to learn it, after all it is "the norm" and unless you are doing something "Western" we won't take you seriously; but if you are doing "Western" things, you have to stop that and go back to your own roots, because we all know you are only imitating.

Well, to go back to your question, I think there is a plot here: if you define someone as a "Japanese" artist doing something "Japanese", then that person becomes castrated and no longer a threat to you. Because he/she is doing something unrelated to you, he/she is not in your field and therefore no longer a competitor to you. So naturally it is in your interest to see to it that so many non-Westerners do as you define "non-Western art" ("exotic art") just to keep them off the field. And as long as those people are doing "non-Western art", you don't have to take them seriously, or even remotely try to understand their works in the same serious way as you do other works, because, yes, they are UNRELATED to you and to the art scene in general. On the other hand, if that person is doing something "Western", then he/she is only "imitating" and therefore a second-rate artist.

When it comes to Sweden, this tendency seems to me much more strict and fiercely stronger than the UK and the US (the two foreign countries I've spent some longer periods of time besides Sweden): Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary, Shirin Neshat, Yoko Ono, etc. would not have had a chance to be accepted in Sweden by the art establishment if they lived here as unknown artists doing the same things. I speculate that the difference between Sweden (and probably Scandinavia as a whole) and the UK or the US is that in the UK and America they have accepted multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society and they have the decency to acknowledge that is the society they do live in (and will live in), while in Sweden they still think in terms of nationalities, with their nationality being the top priority, of course. As long as they have this hierarchy based on nationalities, they would never acknowledge the need to understand other cultures and other dimensions, let alone to see the person as a unique "individual." This thought-structure, so unconsciously grounded in the Swedish psyche, never stops to bewilder me since I know there is probably no single Swedish artist who consciously tries to do "Swedish" art or even aware if such a thing exists. All the Swedish artists I know are usually preoccupied with their own struggle to follow the examples coming from abroad (New York, Berlin, Paris), but they do use this weapon of nationality against non-Swedes to keep them away from the art scene.

My position in this matter is quite simple: West and East, to accept their definition for the sake of this argument, have always been inter-related and influenced each other throughout history. In fact all cultures are "hybrid" - you have contacts with another human-being, another social group, another culture, another country, another continent; you naturally get impressions, and what you do then will naturally have some of that experience in it. And to deny that very experience seems to me just so idiotic. One could also wonder, with all the inventions of this "modern" age of the last 100 years such as transportation and media, if there exists any "pure" nationality. The news are everywhere from every corner of the world; people move from one corner of the world to another; you can converse with anyone in the world through chat-rooms and emails. To conserve/preserve one's national and local heritage with dignity is one thing, but to deny this new social condition appears dishonest to me.

### ***Is this kind of national identity important for you at all...?***

I don't know if "national" identity is important to me but "identity" is. I was in stuttgart some 2-3 years ago to hold a presentation on my CD-Rom at a festival, and the german organisers kept referring to me as "Swedish" or "from Sweden". I had to correct them by saying "and Japanese" or "and from Tokyo". Each time I did this, the Germans got really annoyed - I guess their logic was you live in a country and that's where you are from - "we are so liberated and not at all racistic - that's why we are referring you as 'Swedish'."

Now I do have Swedish citizenship - so technically and leagally they were right (though they didn't know that I hold Swedish citizenship). However, I don't really feel at home in being described simply as a "Swedish" aritst. I moved to Sweden when I was already grown-up; by that time I had

already lived in two other countries (Japan and America); Swedish is actually my third language, with Japanese being my mother-tongue and English being my second language (my first foreign language). Just two years before this incident at the festival, I had lived in UK for a little more than a year. If you present me as a "Swedish" artist, I think there is bound to be some misunderstanding there. Though those people meant well, it also created a problem for me. If they really wanted to show some respect, they could have simply asked me how I wanted to be presented.

On this point, I again have to draw some comparison with the only other language I use nowadays; English. In English (often in American English, I believe) they often use the term "(nationality)- born". For example, Shirin Neshat is often referred to as an "Iranian-born" (American) artist (often American omitted). This seems to be a good way to go, especially in her case since her background does have a relevance in her works. In the field of internet art, this even does not carry any importance. I know so many works by so many artists about whose origins neither I nor anyone else would care. The only time I notice "uh-huh, that person comes from that country"-kind-of-way is when the work gets to be chosen for an International festival - then they usually want to put the origin of the artist/work for some funny unknown reason.

***These may be difficult questions to answer, and I am sure there will be many other interesting topics I could ask you about.... I have not yet seen the exhibition at Ideologia II, but it is not so far from Copenhagen to Gothenburg, so I hope to go there during the summer and see your work.***

Well, I answered your questions strictly from my own experiences. As you know, I took part in the discussion panel at Ideologia II (the Nordic Contemporary Art Biennial), which was more about the immigrant artists' situation in Sweden/Scandinavia (than the effects of immigration on the contemporary art scene), so some of my answers may have been more to do with that topic than what you are looking for....

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*This interview was carried out by Gunhild Borggreen, Scholar of Contemporary Japanese Art History, through email exchange in June 2003 as part of preparation for our joint lecture which took place 4 months later at the Department of Art History, the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Gunhild Borggreen, the interviewer, holds a Ph.D. from the University of Copenhagen. Her dissertation dealt with gender issues in contemporary art criticism and visual arts in Japan. Her research project in the early 2000s concerned the reception of Japanese art in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries and was being carried out with the funds from the Danish Research Council. A part of this research is published in her article "Japan in Scandinavia: Cultural Clichés in Reception of Works of Mori Mariko" in Hz ([www.hz-journal.org/n4/borggreen.html](http://www.hz-journal.org/n4/borggreen.html)). Among Gunhild Borggreen's publications are "Gender in Contemporary Japanese Art," Norman Bryson, Maribeth Graybill, and Joshua Mostow (eds.) *Gender and Power in the Japanese Visual Field* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), "Livmodermetaforer. Køn og national identitet i japansk kunst," *Kunsthistorie + Visuel Kultur: Papirer, nr. 2* (Københavns Universitet, Institut for Kunst- og Kulturvidenskab, 2003), and "Beskæringer," *Øjeblikket. Tidsskrift om kunst – og det kunst handler om, årgang 11, nr. 43, 2004.**