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Beyond 'Japanese/Women Artists'

Transnational Dialogues in the Art of Nobuho Nagasawa and Chiharu Shiota

Midori Yoshimoto

In Germany, I feel I learned to see more parts of me that were invisible in Japan. When you leave salt water on a dish, for example, water evaporates and only salt remains. The salt which you could not see in the salt water crystallizes. I was not visible as an individual in Japan. Whereas I did not know who I was, what I wanted to do, and what was necessary in the water, I feel that I became an individual and crystal, and understood those things for the first time by coming to Germany.

Chiharu Shiota¹

INTRODUCTION

The artists Nobuho Nagasawa and Chiharu Shiota defy the stereotypically essentialist profile of 'Japanese/women artists' as passive and traditional. Although they do not personally know each other, they share the experience of living in Berlin and receiving education in Europe. They have exhibited their works globally over the last decade and resided in cosmopolitan cities outside Japan. Their migrations helped them attain the perspective of the 'outsider' and added further dimensions to their artistic creation. Their mobility also lent complexity to their identities, which could no longer be pigeonholed by ethnic or cultural origin.

For more than two decades, Nagasawa has realized an impressive array of earthworks, public art projects and site-specific installations in a variety of international venues. Her residence in West Berlin during the 1980s (before the reunification of Germany) made her strongly aware of the malleability of one's identity. Although Nagasawa lived in California between 1986 and 2001 before moving to New York, her frequent participation in international projects allowed her to maintain her

1. Chiharu Shiota, interview with Aomi Okabe, transcribed and edited by Mayuko Aota, Musashino Art University, Department of Arts Policy and Management, 2009, http://apm.musabi.ac.jp/imsc/cp/menu/artist/shiota_chiharu/interview.html, accessed 31 October 2012. Unless otherwise noted, quotes from the Japanese have been translated into English by the author.

transnational awareness. Shiota, on the other hand, rose to international fame in the 2000s through her performances and installations after studying in Germany. Since 1999 she has lived in Berlin while frequently travelling to work around Europe, Japan and Australia. In numerous performances and installations, Shiota has addressed her central theme of identity and memory as being inscribed within one's DNA and skin.

These artists' career paths, and their growing reception in the global art scene, pose important questions about being an artist of Asian origin working outside one's home country. Should either of them still be labelled as a Japanese artist simply because of their ethnicity? Does any of their work stem from their Japanese heritage? In addressing these concerns, this article will question the conventionally held presumptions regarding 'Japanese/women artists' and demonstrate how the work of these two artists transcends notions of nationality and gender. Of particular interest is how they both internalize cultural displacement within their work, negotiating their unique places in the competitive art world. In addition, this article will consider new operational modes in which these artists and their work function as catalysts for dialogue beyond national and cultural borders.

'BERLINER'

Berlin functions as a crucible in which Nagasawa and Shiota recognized the complex issues surrounding identity and came to terms with their own selves. About a generation older than Shiota, Nagasawa lived in West Berlin before the reunification of Germany, and pursued her Master of Fine Art at Hochschule der Künste Berlin (currently Berlin University of the Arts) from 1982 to 1985. For her undergraduate degree, she studied at the State Academy of Fine Arts in Maastricht, Netherlands, where she had spent part of her childhood due to her father's work as a diplomat. When she visited *Documenta VII* (1982) in Kassel, Germany, on her graduation from Maastricht in 1982, she encountered Joseph Beuys' tree-planting campaign, *7000 Oaks* (1982–1987). Nagasawa was inspired by his philosophy that 'everyone is an artist, and that creativity is the most important tool in effecting social transformation', and became 'interested in producing works on an environmental scale and engaging people throughout the creative process'.² Subsequently, Nagasawa moved to West Berlin, which she considered to be a 'living example of the division between East and West' and an 'island floating on the "Red Sea"'. She responded to the cosmopolitan culture of Berlin and identified with being a 'Berliner'. Nagasawa remembers visiting 'Eastern bloc countries to experience not only the physical obstacles but also the cultural gap between East and West'. She grew aware of 'how issues such as "self", "other", "gender", "race", and "alienation" are all intertwined on the conscious and subconscious spheres of human experiences' and that 'the "self" was, in part, self-constructed through interactions with others'.³

Nagasawa's experience of Berlin deepened when she created *Navel of the Earth* (1985). One of her earliest earthworks, it was constructed in the ruins of a Jewish synagogue in Kreuzberg, near the Berlin Wall. Hoping to

2. Nobuho Nagasawa, quoted in Midori Yoshimoto, 'Reflections on Creative Collaboration in Contemporary Art: Collaborative Art of Nobuho Nagasawa', *Academic Forum* (published by New Jersey City University), vol 13, no 2, 2004, p 57. See <http://www.njcu.edu/aa/academic-forum/>.

3. Nobuho Nagasawa, 'General Approach and Influences', unpublished statement, 2004, no pagination

give new life to the earth that had been ravaged during the Second World War, she decided to excavate one section of the ruins and burn it for reclamation. Her proposal sparked intense debate among the Jewish and German communities, partly because of the danger of buried bombs detonating, but also because of the complex feelings surrounding the site. After several months of listening to the communities and better explaining her intentions, she eventually received permission. Nagasawa removed enough earth at the site to create a crater-like hole and burnt a significant amount of sawdust in it by protecting the fire with large steel plates. Life came back to the site in the following spring and people embraced the site, which still exists as a small community garden in Berlin. This experience led the artist to realize that ‘art can provide a visual poetry to the environment as well as function as a catalyst to deconstruct and reinvent a new vision of our society’.⁴ Nagasawa’s philosophy of positioning the community at the core of her creative process continues to be a guiding principle in her work, while being an outside observer accentuates this catalytic role.

For Shiota, her time in Berlin was one of intensely questioning her identity and place in the world as well. Since she did not move there until 1999 (a decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall), she did not experience the political tension from the Cold War as directly as Nagasawa did. By the turn of the millennium, Berlin had transformed itself into a major economic and commercial centre. Shiota saw Berlin as a ‘town in motion’ and witnessed it ‘constantly renewing itself . . . New buildings going up. New people around. There’s always fresh air around.’⁵ But rather than taking an interest in this new Berlin, Shiota found more inspiration in the history of the city. Over several years she collected hundreds of old windows from construction sites in former East Berlin. She recalled that she ‘could not help but wonder how East Berliners felt about the West Berliner’s way of life’, and at the same time, the windows felt like her ‘skin’, dividing inside from outside. She further stated:

Whether one calls it [a window] ‘skin’ or calls it ‘self’, it was a boundary I could not pass across . . . I still feel that I am standing alienated in the zone between the inside and the outside of the boundary.⁶

This sense of being ‘in-between’ developed because she did not feel she belonged to either Japan or Germany.⁷ Among a series of installations Shiota created with the windows, *House of Windows* (2005) seems particularly symbolic of peripatetic people or *selves* who make a home wherever they migrate. The fragility of this dwelling, like the vulnerabilities inherent in the nomadic lifestyle, makes a powerful visual statement. Having been shown at several museums in Europe, the work travelled to Fukuoka, Japan, reinforcing the sense of displacement and dislocation. The work has a telling similarity to the Korean artist Do-Ho Suh’s artwork *Seoul Home* (1999), which has also travelled to numerous venues around the world.⁸ Unlike Suh’s beautifully crafted silk sculpture, Shiota’s artwork consists of found objects with individual histories, which give the work a certain weightiness despite its house-of-cards-like delicacy.

Like Nagasawa, Shiota studied at the Berlin University of the Arts for a graduate degree. Although Shiota had grown up in Osaka and studied

4. Nagasawa quoted in Yoshimoto, op cit, p 57

5. Didi Kirsten Tatlow, ‘Interview with Chiharu Shiota: ai performance for the planet’, ai, summer 2001, pp 20–27, www.texte.chiharu-shiota.com/texte/ai.pdf, accessed 25 October 2012

6. Chiharu Shiota, statement in *Third Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale*, exhibition catalogue, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Fukuoka, 2005, p 158

7. Shiota, interview with Okabe, op cit

8. The official title of the work has been extended as it has travelled around the world. As of 2012, it is *Seoul Home/LA Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home/LA Home*, 1999. For the image of this work, see www.lehmannmaupin.com/artists/do-ho-suh/press_release/0/artist_selected/1, accessed 17 October 2012.



Chiharu Shiota, *House of Windows*, 2005, approximately two hundred old windows, 500 (h) x 300 (w) x 450 (d) cm, shown in the Third Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan, courtesy the artist, photo: Fukuoka Asian Art Museum

Western-style painting at Seika University in Kyoto, she spent a semester during her junior year at the Canberra School of Art at the Australian National University. Shiota became inspired by the work of women artists active in the 1970s, including Magdalena Abakanowicz. In fact, Shiota tried to study with her but, through a funny misunderstanding, she ended up studying with Marina Abramović. Shiota's Hungarian friend, whom she met in Australia, confused Abakanowicz with Abramović, and sent Shiota the information for Abramović's university. As a result, Shiota went to the University of Fine Arts, Hamburg, where Abramović taught.⁹ Soon after, she followed Abramović, who moved to teach at Braunschweig University of Art. After several months, however, she found herself to be a misfit in a small town and moved to Berlin. As Shiota conveys when she compares herself to salt crystals in the epigraph, living in Berlin away from Japan has shaped who she is now. The multi-ethnic composition of Berlin and its complex history attracted both Shiota and Nagasawa and urged them to reconsider their identity.

9. Chiharu Shiota, 'Shiota Chiharu no Berurin daiari' ('Berlin Diary by Chiharu Shiota'), *Asahi Gurafu*, 11 February 2000, www.hotcola.com/chiharu/press_3.html, accessed 17 October 2012
10. Regarding the tower's history, see Doug Smith, 'Free-spirited Sculptor Nobu Creates Art and Shelter in Her Adobe on Campus of CalArts: Fired Imagination', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 May 1987; and David Colker, 'Controversy Lingers Over Sculpture: CalArts: Questions remain over the handling of demolition of the tower, which was vandalized, and what – if anything – to put in its place', *Los Angeles Times*, 18 January 1991.
11. Eric C Shiner, 'Planting Minefields of Engagement as Far as the Mind Can See', in Eric C Shiner and Reiko Tomii, eds, *Making a Home: Japanese Contemporary Artists in New York*, Japan Society Gallery, New York, 2007, p 121
12. Takashi Serizawa, *Konowakusei o yudosuru: Intanetto jidai ni mou hitotsu no ikikata o motomete (Orbiting the Planet: Seeking An Alternative Lifestyle in the Internet Age)*, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo, 1996, pp 25–26

NOMADIC JOURNEY – A SEARCH FOR 'HOME'

Another link between these artists is the nomadic, soul-searching journey that has shaped the core of each artist's art. The year before Nagasawa graduated from the Art Academy in West Berlin in 1984, she took the Trans-Siberian Railway through Eastern Europe, Russia, Mongolia and China, and finally returned to Japan after a six-year absence. Later, when she moved to Los Angeles for her postgraduate research at the California Institute of the Arts, her memory of this trip inspired *Earthwork Process 7* (1987). The artwork recalls the ruins of earthen structures near Ürümqi (on the northern Silk Road in Xinjiang, China) and the Islamic minarets of northern Pakistan. Built from adobe bricks into a cone shape, Nagasawa's tower was twenty-two feet tall and oriented like a symbolic mandala that incorporated the four elements – facing North for the wind, South for the earth, East for fire (the sun from the East), and West for water (Pacific Ocean in the West). Its completion required firing for five days with the help of hundreds of local residents and her friends.¹⁰ Building monumental earthworks was part of Nagasawa's quest for her artistic identity, which often melds varied cultural inspirations and is not limited to Japanese expressions.

Although Nagasawa decided to stay in Los Angeles for the time being, she continued to move freely between Berlin, Los Angeles and Tokyo for different projects and exhibitions as her 'nomadic spirit' guided. She realized that she was a 'citizen of a planet', and that her 'home' could be anywhere.¹¹ In his book, *Orbiting the Planet: Seeking An Alternative Lifestyle in the Internet Age*, the director of P3 Art and Environment, Takashi Serizawa mentions Nagasawa as an example of a 'planet nomad' who continues to travel away from home and has an ability to discover memories embedded in various sites. Nagasawa herself accepts this characterization and admits that her working process is like an 'excavation of sites' that she encounters.¹² Nagasawa's view of herself as the



Nobuo Nagasawa. *Earthwork Process 7*, 1987, bricks, mud, straw, copper glaze, sea water and fire, 740 (h) x 500 (w) x 500 (d) cm, Valencia, California, courtesy of the artist, photo: Steven Günther

‘citizen of a planet’ relates to Gayatri Spivak’s concept of ‘planetary’, which considers the planet we share as being ‘on loan’ to humans and suggests a more sensitive attitude towards ecology and the earth.¹³ Nagasawa’s artistic engagement embodies this planetary in that she attunes herself to the history of a site and brings out its physical and temporal ‘memory’ in order to open up a dialogue with the local community.

For Nagasawa, it has been important to keep moving between metropolises. She moved to Berlin from The Netherlands due to the need to disassociate herself from people’s expectation of her. Similarly, she found the community in University of California Santa Cruz rather small and opted for a move to New York City when another teaching position

13. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003, pp 71–102

opened in 2001. Although she struggled with the events of 11 September 2001, the experience helped her feel connected to the New York community. Finding a new home inspired Nagasawa to create *Bodywaves* (2007), in conjunction with a group exhibition at the Japan Society, entitled 'Making a Home: Japanese Contemporary Artists in New York' (2007). To symbolize 'home', she conceived an interactive rocking chair. She wrapped the welded steel framework with optical fibre, which was woven in Kyoto, her place of birth. The fibre emitted a blue light, pulsating to the rhythm of the artist's heartbeat. In the background, speakers played the sound of water flowing, recorded from the rivers of the Pacific Northwest as they empty into the ocean (the Pacific connects Japan and the United States). A glass table next to the chair displays the artist's umbilical cord in a Petri dish and a collection of her grey hair in a glass jar, which, taken together, evoke her life passing. The passage of time is also suggested by a large hourglass nearby, which mixes black sand from her mother's hometown Kagoshima and white sand from the United States. The mixed sand in the hourglass represents Nagasawa's hybridity – where she came from and where she is now. Equipped with an accelerometer, the pulsations of light of the chair can also change according to the movement of the sitter/participant. The chair's interaction with the viewer embodies the artist's relationship to the people she has encountered in her life.¹⁴ Interweaving complex symbols from her life, the *Bodywave* installation stands for Nagasawa's life journey and, in particular, the process of making a home in New York. The chair enveloped in flowing blue light resembles a boat travelling through a river.



14. Nobuho Nagasawa, text included in the documentary video of *Bodywaves*, <http://emedia.art.sunysb.edu/nagasawa/>, accessed 31 October 2012

Nobuho Nagasawa, *Bodywaves*, 2007, woven optical fibre, extruded vinyl cord, steel, accelerometer, sensor, illuminator, DMX controller, recorded sound, computer, speakers, MIDI interface, medicine jar, grey hair, petri dish and umbilical cord, 36 (h) x 27 (w) x 40.5 (d) in, shown in 'Making a Home: Japanese Artists in New York' exhibition at Japan Society Gallery, courtesy the artist, photo: Takamitsu Miyamoto

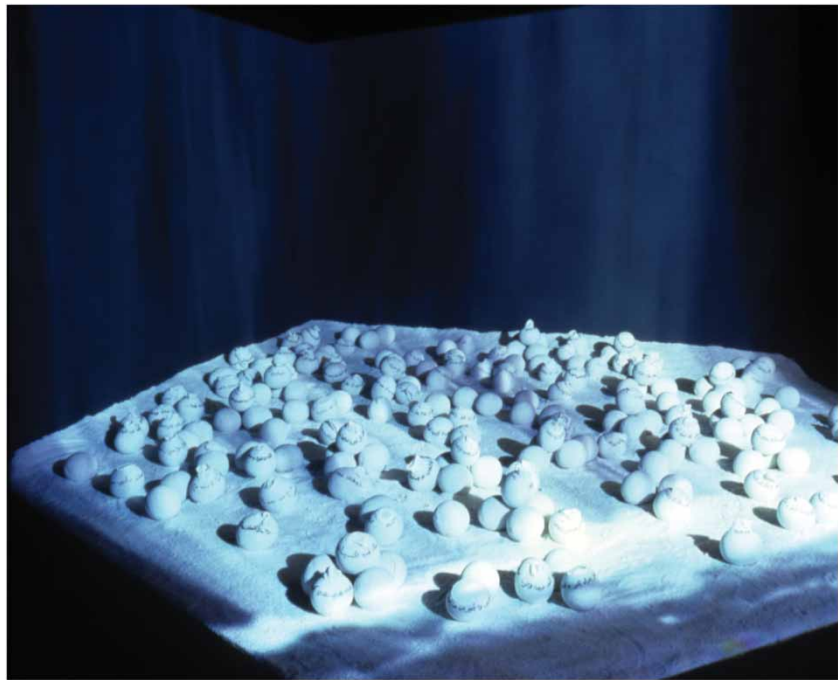
15. Shiota quoted in Tatehata, 'Allegory of Absence', op cit, no pagination
16. Steffi Goldmann quoted in Rachel Wolff, 'The Annotated Artwork *Waiting*', *New York*, 18 February 2008, p 63
17. Midori Yamamura recently challenged the established myth of Yayoi Kusama's illness and argued that her hallucination was largely caused by medications prescribed by a psychiatrist she started seeing in New York in 1962. While this analysis is significant, the author believes that Kusama's shift around 1962–1963 from object-making to the construction of her persona through performance and fashion was a self-conscious act. See Midori Yamamura, 'Re-Viewing Kusama, 1950–1975: Biography of Things', in Jaap Guldemond, Franck Gautherot and Seungduk Kim, eds, *Yayoi Kusama: Mirrored Years*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2009, p 100. On the latter point by Yamamura, see Midori Yoshimoto, 'Yayoi Kusama sauve le monde par la Self-Obliteration', in *Yayoi Kusama*, exhibition catalogue, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2011, pp 73–74.
18. Tsutomu Mizusawa, 'Something Wiggling in the Distant Quietude – Where Chiharu Shiota Belongs', in *From In Silence: Chiharu Shiota*, exhibition catalogue, Kanagawa Prefectural Gallery, Yokohama, 2007, p 15
19. Yoshinaga Moritani, 'Artist Interview Shiota Chiharu', Midori Yoshimoto, trans, 2001, www.hotcola.com/chiharu/press_2.html, accessed 31 October 2012
20. Tatlow, 'Interview with Chiharu Shiota', op cit

Shiota similarly went through an intense period of searching for 'home' while exploring her identity. Instead of travelling as extensively as Nagasawa did, Shiota's search was more internal. Shiota moved a total of nine times during her first three years of living in Berlin. Describing the feeling of dislocation every time she woke up, she stated: 'Everything visible seems to be woven into a web of anxiety which immobilizes my body. But I become more anxious thinking that I would not be able to create work if this anxiety disappears.'¹⁵ While by the assessment of Berlin curator Steffi Goldmann 'her production is sustained by a desire to contain her own inner perturbation and her often overpowering anxiety', this characterization seems to draw parallels to a kind of 'psychosomatic art' as her predecessor Yayoi Kusama used to describe her own creative process.¹⁶ Struggling to break into the competitive New York art world in the 1960s, Kusama claimed that she has had a hallucinatory vision of a net pattern taking over the world since her childhood and she creates art in order to overcome this illness.¹⁷ For both Kusama and Shiota, however, the conscious acknowledgement of angst as a propelling force for their artistic creation was a major discovery and turning point in their careers. Instead of being controlled by their anxiety, they have taken ownership of it and turned it into a productive force for their art.

Numerous cobweb-like installations that Shiota produced after 2002 are the result of this revelation. Beginning as a small experiment in her old Berlin studio, the web of black yarn grew rapidly, eventually engulfing a burned piano and chairs. The monumental installation, *In Silence*, was first shown at South Korea's Gwangju Biennale in 2006, followed by various international venues. The motif of a burnt piano was inspired by the artist's childhood memory of witnessing a fire in her neighbourhood. Shiota found the burnt piano looked more beautiful than it had before. She somehow identified with the burnt piano and felt as if her 'voice had been burnt'. Upon getting home she had the urge to play the piano, even though her mother admonished her not to.¹⁸ The piano in the installation, therefore, can be seen as a symbol of resistance and perhaps Shiota's alter ego. The crisscrossing network of yarn evokes a cobweb, which naturally spreads over everything that stays still for a long enough time. It also embodies a state of psychological and physical entrapment. Shiota may have created it as a warning to herself not to stay in one place and to continue her nomadic condition as a necessary source for her artistic creation. At the same time, the black web may represent the release of vital energy emanating from death, as the nomad is reborn with each new journey.

Shiota has openly empathized with Jewish people, who were expelled from their homeland and formed an early diaspora around the world.¹⁹ In redefining what 'homeland' meant, she decided to use the German word for it, *Heimat*, and declared: 'My own *Heimat*, that's inside, a personal thing. Art is a *Heimat*. And looking for it is what my art is about.'²⁰ To reach this realization, Shiota explored her limits through intensive performances. In one of the performance workshops she undertook, taught by Abramović in the late 1990s, participants were required to fast without speaking for five days, and asked to write a note at the end. Shiota wrote 'Japan' on the verge of her collapse, perhaps recognizing that she cannot escape the fact she is of Japanese

origin.²¹ The performance *Try and Go Home* (1998) grew out of this workshop. For this Shiota rolled down a slope, getting her naked body battered, scarred and smeared with mud, expressing the struggle one has to go through in searching for one's identity. Shiota's attempt is reminiscent of Gutai artist Kazuo Shiraga's *Challenging Mud* (1955) performance, and *Siluetta*, a series of performances in the 1970s by the Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta, whom Shiota admires.²² Demonstrated in front of the press on the occasion of Gutai's first exhibition in Tokyo in 1955, Shiraga's corporeal performance has been interpreted as a critique of Japan's wartime totalitarianism and an expression of subjective autonomy – resonating with Shiota's quest for her identity.²³ Compared with Mendieta's serene union with the earth, however, Shiota appears to be struggling with it. In fact, the difficulty she experienced in washing mud away after this performance led to the next performance, *Bathroom* (1999), in which Shiota repeatedly washed her mud-smeared body with water in her apartment and videotaped herself. In an interview, Shiota mentioned that it was 'about feelings and being born, about not being able to wash away that and how you can never *finish* with it'.²⁴ It was a ritualistic act for her to confirm her ethnic identity, ingrained as it were within her skin, and to come to terms with that fact. Shiota's use of windows is a metaphor for skin in her *House of Windows*, and skin as a signifier of selfhood and boundaries is a recurring motif in her work. Nagasawa's and Shiota's nomadic journeys are searches for



Nobuho Nagasawa, *her render: she gives back naturally what is true in her nature*, 2003, salt, nylon and video projection, 11.4 (h) x 14 (w) x 10.8 (d) cm (each egg), shown at the Sharjah International Biennial, Sharjah Museum, United Arab Emirates, courtesy the artist

21. Shōji Inoue, 'Futashikana jibun eno sokonashi no fuan' (Bottomless Anxiety of Uncertain Self), *Tenpyō* 9, autumn 2001, www.hotcola.com/chiharu/press_1.html, accessed 17 October 2012
22. Tatlow, 'Interview with Chiharu Shiota', op cit
23. Ming Tiampo, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2011, pp 42–43
24. Tatlow, 'Interview with Chiharu Shiota', op cit

their ‘homes’ not only in a literal sense, but also in a metaphorical sense. Their journeys were necessary to search out their roots and explore their identity. As Shiota realized that her Heimat is hidden inside herself, ‘making a home’ is a coming to terms with one’s identity and acceptance of it. After travelling around the world, Nagasawa also came to realize the importance of her Japanese roots. Through multi-layered presentations of *Bodywaves*, Nagasawa reflected on her own life journey. The distance from Japan and their families has made these artists’ senses of themselves sharper and stronger.

POWER OF AN OUTSIDER: DISPLACEMENT AS CREATIVE FORCE

It is worth noting that Nagasawa and Shiota imposed geographical and cultural displacement upon themselves by leaving their home countries and living in metropolitan cities – Berlin, Los Angeles and New York. Nagasawa has mentioned that there is always a sense of crisis in big cities, which may be necessary for artists to hone their sensitivity and encourage their creative impulse.²⁵ In this regard, there have been predecessors such as Yoko Ono and Yayoi Kusama, who both moved to New York in the late 1950s and made a name for themselves in a foreign land. Even though they left Japan to seek more artistic and social freedom, they ironically found themselves up against the strongly persisting Western preconception of ‘Japanese women’ as passive and subservient. Ono recalled that she was often put off by Americans who approached her with an expectation that she would be quiet and submissive. When she defied their expectations, she was regarded as unusual or even outrageous.²⁶ Ono’s feeling that people did not understand her was exacerbated by societal expectations of her gender. By drawing attention to people’s conceptual ‘blind spots’ Ono believed she was exercising her ‘power as an outsider’.²⁷ In performances such as *Cut Piece* (1964), the experience of being an outsider was expressed by reversing the roles of the performer and the audience, asking the audience to get on stage with her and cut off a piece of her dress with scissors. The dress can be equated to Shiota’s ‘skin’ work (symbolizing one’s boundary) – while the cutting away of the dress symbolizes a state of vulnerability and the breakdown of these boundaries. In New York’s male-dominated art scene, Kusama also learned to turn her disadvantage to advantage. She felt that she had a special freedom because she was Japanese and an outsider in American society.²⁸ Although being a Japanese woman was a double disadvantage in this context, she empowered herself by transgressing many taboos in producing phalli-studded objects and body-painting performances.²⁹

Unlike Ono and Kusama, Nagasawa and Shiota have not felt that they have been marginalized in society due to their gender. Thanks to those trailblazers in the 1960s and 1970s, there are many prominent women artists around the globe today, and gender inequality is less overt. For Nagasawa and Shiota, the feeling of being an outsider seems to stem mainly from residing in a foreign society. They both resist being labelled as women artists or feminists, but that does not mean they ignore those issues. In fact, some of their works contain distinct motifs pertaining to women’s experiences and issues.

25. Nobuho Nagasawa, email communication to the author, 30 October 2012

26. Yoko Ono, quoted in Midori Yoshimoto, ‘Instructions for Life: Rediscovering Yoko Ono’, *dialogue (the Magazine of the Asian American Arts Alliance)*, vol 4, no 1, spring 2001, p 20

27. Yoko Ono, in conversation with David Ross, an event held in conjunction with the exhibition ‘Yes Yoko Ono’ at the Japan Society, New York, October 2000

28. Yayoi Kusama, quoted in Dana Friis-Hansen, ‘Yayoi Kusama’s Feminism’, *ART + TEXT* 49, 1994, p 50

29. For more on my discussion of Ono and Kusama, see Midori Yoshimoto, *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey and London, 2005

For example, Nagasawa created numerous human-brain-sized eggs from rock salt, terracotta or dirt in several community-participation installations. In 2003, when the war in Iraq had just begun, she presented *her render* at the 6th Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates. She produced ‘eggs’ made of rock salt wrapped in nylon stockings. The quantity of salt in each egg was roughly equivalent to how much salt is required for a year of human life. One hundred eggs removed from the nylon after drying were considered ‘male’. Another hundred remaining wrapped in nylon were considered ‘female’. Nagasawa invited a group of young women students from the Sharjah University to express their private thoughts by writing them in Arabic letters on the female eggs. Initially, the exhibition organizer, the Sultan’s daughter, Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, was concerned that her project would cause a public outcry of indecency because of the ‘contentious’ material (nylon stockings) and that it was based on ‘American feminism’, and thus was patronizing. Bravely, Nagasawa wrote a letter directly to the Sultan’s daughter, primarily to stress that she is a ‘Japanese’ living in the United States and as such was a member of a ‘minority’. In addition, the letter sought to convince the Sultan’s daughter that her work should not be narrowly labelled as ‘feminist’, arguing that it came from a more humanistic viewpoint and sought to connect with Muslim women. The inner thoughts she was hoping to draw upon from these women were not necessarily expected to be the ‘voices of suffering’ but rather the ‘voices of joy and dignity of being women in their own right’.³⁰ Nagasawa’s letter was effective and the project was carried out to completion. Afterwards, a number of the participating women reported that the collaboration process inspired ‘meaningful change and a real sense of possibility’.³¹ The full title, *her render: she gives back naturally what is true in her nature* meant ‘giving oneself to another, rendering oneself, and flowering’ or ‘what woman can offer from within herself’.³² The eggs covered in nylon perhaps represented Muslim women in veils. Through writing on the eggs, women’s voices and inner worlds became visible and were heard. As this example demonstrates, Nagasawa’s position as an outsider enables her to discover the hidden voices of those marginalized by the societies she visits and renders them into poetic form. This is an ability she has nurtured through her transnational experiences.

Similarly evocative of women’s lives is Shiota’s recent work, *Dialogue with Absence* and *Wall* (both from 2010). *Dialogue* is an installation that fills the room with an oversized white wedding dress on the wall, connected to numerous plastic tubes transporting red liquid. Adjacent to this installation is a small monitor showing Shiota’s performance video, *Wall*. In it, the artist lies unclothed on the white floor, her body covered by a skein of medical tubes pumping red liquid. Seemingly asleep, her breathing is audible and regular, except for the times when she twitches from the discomfort of the liquid moving around her body. Seen together, Shiota’s video and installation proclaim the virtual presence of the body and the physical absence of the body. Is the protagonist hospitalized elsewhere on life support? Is this a nightmare of an unrealized wedding? Does the dress embody an archetype of universal womanhood, both drained and fed by societal expectations of the perfect wife and mother? The suggested narratives are disturbing and suggest that these images stem from the artist’s personal experience. In fact, Shiota’s recent experience of cancer

30. Nobuho Nagasawa, letter to Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi, 24 February 2003

31. Nobuho Nagasawa, quoted in Yoshimoto, ‘Reflections on Creative Collaboration in Contemporary Art’, op cit, p 59

32. Nobuho Nagasawa, artist statement for *her render – she gives back naturally what is true in her nature*, 2003



Chiharu Shiota, *Dialogue with Absence*, 2010, painted wedding dress, peristaltic pumps, transparent plastic tubing, dyed water, dimensions variable, shown at Christophe Gaillard Pop-up Gallery, Berlin, © Chiharu Shiota

33. David Elliott, 'Bye Bye Kitty', in Elliott, *Bye Bye Kitty!!! Between Heaven and Hell in Contemporary Japanese Art*, Japan Society, New York and Yale University Press, New Haven, 2011, p 36

34. Madoka Matsumura, 'The Works of Chiharu Shiota – A Study', in *Chiharu Shiota – Where Are We Going?*, exhibition catalogue, Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, Marugame, Japan, 2012, p 59

35. 'Me as Others' (*tasha de aru watashi*) was the title Shiota gave to her recent exhibition at the Mitsubishi-Jisho Altium Gallery in Fukuoka, Japan in 2012.

36. Tatlow, 'Interview with Chiharu Shiota', op cit

and her subsequent hospitalization seem to have led to the conception of the work.³³ Rather than making it autobiographical, however, she uses hundreds of arteries and veins to visualize an internal 'wall' or boundary which anybody has and which binds him/her.³⁴ Also reminiscent of Frida Kahlo's renowned painting, *Two Fridas* (1939), Shiota's nightmarish vision seems to draw on her own feelings of herself as the 'Other', which also echoes Ono's statement about being an outsider.³⁵ While Nagasawa and Shiota resisted categorization as women artists, their self-positioning outside the centre and ability to turn displacement into creative force are shared by the many female creators who came before.

REPRESENTING/REVISITING JAPAN

For transnational artists like Nagasawa and Shiota, the nation-based presentation system typical in international biennials and triennials could be problematic at times. Both artists were invited to many exhibitions with a theme related to 'globalization', as Japanese representatives, and to group exhibitions of Japanese contemporary art in the 1990s. Shiota openly stated that she often represented Japan and it was a 'heavy burden' for her. She wondered whether she was invited because she was Japanese or because of her work and felt a need to 'be more, in order to get past this'.³⁶ After her participation in the Yokohama



Nobuo Nagasawa, *Time Sculpture – Koro-pok-kuru*, 2012, earth, flower seeds, butterbur plants, gravel and a boulder, 7 (h) x 60 (w) x 60 (d) ft, Tokachi Millennium Forest, Hokkaido, Japan, courtesy the artist

Triennial in 2001, however, invitations to show her work in Japan have dramatically increased and she has returned to Japan almost every year for solo exhibitions at Kenji Taki Gallery in Tokyo or Nagoya, and solo/group exhibitions at various museums across Japan. In Shiota's case, her residency in Berlin and active exhibition history outside Japan seem to have distinguished her from other Japanese artists.

Nagasawa, on the other hand, has often been part of group exhibitions of Japanese art, both domestic and abroad, since the early 1990s. These included 'Invisible Nature' (1994), the first large-scale exhibition that introduced contemporary Japanese art to the Czech Republic and Germany, for example. Considering her inclusion in these seminal exhibitions, it seems contradictory that she was not chosen to represent Japan at the 100th anniversary of the Venice Biennial (1995) due to her long foreign residency. She has often found herself in this double bind: she is still regarded as a 'Japanese artist' in the United States, while she is excluded from considerations for Japanese awards and honours because of her extended non-residency status. More recently, however, Nagasawa has been invited back to Japan frequently to create site-specific works involving community participation, such as the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial (2000 and 2003), the Fukushima Biennial (2012), and the Setouchi International Art Festival

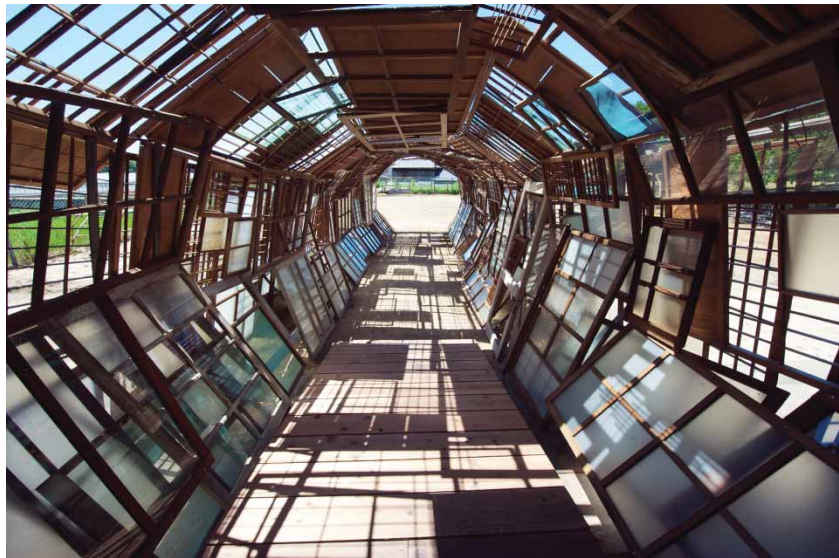
(2013). These art festivals have been launched in various remote regions of Japan in the last decade in order to revitalize those socially and economically declining areas through art.³⁷ Unlike the Venice Biennial, these art festivals do not invite an artist representative from each participating country. Their roster of artists comprises mostly Japanese artists who reside in Japan, and a handful of foreign artists as well as Japanese artists who reside outside Japan.³⁸ Nagasawa's and Shiota's impressive record of realizing community-based projects overseas has caught the attention of Japanese curators. Even though they incur more travel expenses than domestic artists would, they are repeatedly invited back to these festivals because of the originality and the strength of their work.

One of Nagasawa's most recent projects is *Time Sculpture – Koro-pok-kuru*, which joined the permanent installations at the Tokachi Millennium Forest in Hokkaido, Japan (2012). Koro-pok-kuru are a race of 'small people', literally meaning, 'people under the leaves of the butterbur plant' in the language of the Ainu, the indigenous population of Hokkaido. In it, she created a circular earthwork with two entry points on its eastern and western sides and a hollow space surrounding a boulder in the centre. On the ridge of the circle, butterbur plants were planted, and the sloping shoulders of the earthwork were covered with grass so that visitors could lean their backs on the interior slope and look up at the sky. In addition, she constructed 500 'eggs' (out of local soil, containing native flower seeds) with workshop participants and, with their help, installed them inside the sculpture. Since the number 500 corresponds to the approximate number of ova a woman releases in her lifetime, these eggs were made to symbolize the regeneration of the forest.³⁹ This new work exemplifies the philosophy and process behind most of Nagasawa's art, which involves in-depth research into the cultural

37. For the background of the art producer Fram Kitagawa and his Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial and Setouchi International Art Festival, see Adrian Favell, *Before and After Superflat: A Short History of Japanese Contemporary Art 1900–2011*, Blue Kingfisher, Hong Kong, 2011, pp 174–183.

38. It is worth noting that both Echigo-Tsumari and Setouchi list all artists alphabetically and provide their originating country or prefecture (in the case of Japan), whereas Fukushima divides the artists by the countries of their residence. For example, Nagasawa's origin is listed as 'Tokyo' on the Setouchi website, while she is categorized under USA with Yoko Ono and two other Japanese artists on the Fukushima website. See www.echigo-tsumari.jp/artist/all/ (Echigo-Tsumari); setouchi-artfest.jp/en/artists (Setouchi); and www.wa-art.com/bien/bien2012e/sakka.html (Fukushima), accessed 30 October 2012.

39. Nobuho Nagasawa, unpublished PowerPoint presentation on *Time Sculpture – Koro-pok-kuru*, 2012



Chiharu Shiota, *Farther Memory*, 2010, approximately 600 old windows, 270 (h) x 340 (w) x 2250 (d) cm, shown at the Setouchi International Art Festival in Teshima, Takamatsu, Japan, © Chiharu Shiota

history, environment and memory of the specific locations, as well as community participation. Through working with diverse communities on various projects she learns something new each time, and grows as an artist while planting the seeds of environmental and social transformation for those people.

The process of community participation has also become essential to Shiota's more recent work, *Farther Memory* (2010), a tunnel-like structure built of old windows collected in Teshima Island, as part of the Setouchi International Art Festival. Considering the history of the island (during which the industrial waste from other cities was shipped in and discarded), she did not want to leave more waste for future generations. With the help of local residents, she gathered 600 unique used windows to form a tunnel both within and outside a former community centre. Reminiscent of her *House of Windows*, each window's history embedded in its frame and glass triggered different memories for the viewers. Unlike *House of Windows*, however, the sense of entrapment is replaced with a sense of openness; the ends of the tunnel frame views of the rice fields and the ocean. By capturing the beauty of the environment, the work functions as a reminder of the past, but also stands for a hopeful present and future. For the Teshima islanders, who have faced severe depopulation over decades, the tunnel symbolizes hope. This work and its process made Shiota truly understand the importance of communicating with local people and how this enriched her own life.⁴⁰

By revisiting Japan as mature artists, both Nagasawa and Shiota may be reconciling their ethnic and cultural roots through engagement with the various local communities they encounter across Japan. Their motivations are far from nationalistic, however. Their transnationality allows them to observe Japan as half-outsiders and allows them the opportunity to help local residents rediscover something precious that may have been forgotten or buried about their culture, society and themselves. Ultimately, wherever they are at work around the globe, their work encourages dialogue among viewers, which extends beyond the boundaries of gender, ethnicity and culture.

40. Natsuko Odate, 'Shiota Chiharu intabyū: Sasaina omoi ga yobisamasu kyotsu kioku no suicchi' ('Chiharu Shiota Interview: Small Sentiments Trigger Common Memory Like a Switch'), *ART iT*, 10 September 2010, www.art-it.asia/u/admin_ed_itv/i2vWjzhgHI7kLYVuxMA8/, accessed 31 October 2012

To see the images of artworks that could not be reproduced here and the artists' biographies, please visit the following websites: emedia.art.sunysb.edu/nagasawa/ for Nagasawa, and www.chiharu-shiota.com/ for Shiota.
