

Yoshida Shingo

You produce work while traveling around the world. How has your stay in Berlin related to your long-term perspective?

My initial motivation for going to Berlin was that some French friends and I were able to rent the first floor of a large building, formerly occupied by the Stasi, the East German secret police and intelligence agency, at an amazingly low cost. After that, I participated in the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs overseas training program, which led to a long-term stay. At that time, I was able to make Berlin my base of operations while flying here and there around the world on budget airlines, and as I watched the city transform into a full-fledged capital, I felt a sense of excitement every day.

Berlin is a truly vibrant city where many people come from all over the world to explore new possibilities and take on new challenges, and at the same time there is abundant nature in the surrounding countryside, and the more leisurely pace of life makes it easy to concentrate on making art. On the other hand, in the former East Berlin away from the busy downtown, there was a bizarre sense as if time had stopped. I was happy to be able to observe and experience a period of time when Berlin was accepting various changes in ideas, values, working styles, lifestyles, and society.

My “working while traveling around the world” originated with a video performance piece I released as a student in France around 2003. It involved tossing a suitcase randomly and going in the direction it landed, traveling to different parts of the world with different ways of thinking and social norms. The work was about questioning your own values and identity, about exploring what is essential and true, while at the same time allowing yourself to feel outrage at the absurdities of the world relating to race, nationality, borders, economy, society, wealth and poverty, power, systems, order, and the things people take for granted. However, I kept in mind that I was a guest, and just as you should not barge into someone’s house, criticize them, and impose your own ideas, my goal was to be an artist who acts as an intermediary, creating opportunities for dialogue, and as a detective making observations about society.

My stay in Berlin will end in May of this year (2021), and I’ll go back to France. There’s no particular reason, you could say I’m operating by intuition. Just when I was realizing that the “wall” I needed to get over before I could blend in with German society was too high for me, some old friends reached out to me from France, so the timing seemed right.

In living and working overseas, what are the differences from Japan, or the benefits and drawbacks, that you’ve noticed?

Japanese society has rules that seem to get more rigid year by year, and it feels a bit claustrophobic, but I think the national character is wonderful and it enables people to maintain social order and unite around common values like safety, cleanliness, relationships of mutual trust, respect, and kindness to others. However, I believe the time will come when Japan becomes a truly global society, and as immigration brings in more

people born and raised in different places, with different ideologies and senses of right and wrong, we will see significant conflicts and discrimination bubble up to the surface in a way we're not yet seeing today.

If you look back at our history, there has been plenty of discrimination in Japan, and racial discrimination exists today. Recently these issues have been more or less out of sight, out of mind, and people have been able to take a passive attitude, like "racial issues affect countries on the continents, which share land borders, it's nothing to do with an island nation like ours," but as things become more internationalized we are going to do more soul-searching. To that end, I think it's vital to educate young people to accept different cultures by learning about international issues like conflict and migration, and about social order.

I'm not saying that life overseas is a picnic, and in a society where *not trusting* others is the norm, there's always a sense of nervous tension in daily life. But because this is a multi-ethnic country where the same social norms don't apply to everyone, it's easy for me personally to live, without demanding too much from others, neither placing expectations on them nor having theirs placed on me.

In that light, I think the difference in making art here rather than in Japan has to do with whether or not precedents are emphasized. Overseas, too, people sometimes hesitate when they're presented with something unfamiliar, but I feel they tend to be more positive and accepting, like "Hey, that's something new, that's interesting." It may come from being used to cultural differences, and encountering others with whom you don't have a mutual understanding.

Has the global pandemic and the increasing polarization of society affected your work?

Even under ordinary circumstances, there are always obstacles and restrictions that come with every project, so I'm used to it to some extent. But it's really difficult to plan travel, because situations at national borders change every other week due to the pandemic. However, seen from a different perspective, there are interesting things about these times, and unusual opportunities. I took advantage of Japan's "Go To Travel" campaign, and I was easily able to reschedule flights, so it was as hassle-free as getting on a train.

In some countries curfews are strictly enforced, but my curiosity about how things look under extraordinary circumstances got the better of me, and I would sneak out in the middle of the night. Even with restrictions on public life, it was possible to travel, so for example, during the first lockdown in the UK I deliberately chose London as a stopover and explored Heathrow Airport, which was like a ghost city I had all to myself.

In this exhibition, in addition to video work, you also presented a combination of photographs and drawings. What did you have in mind in terms of spatial composition?

I think of the drawings as separate from the photographs and videos, but I depict emotions

and experiences from the sites where I shot the photos and videos, like a diary, using a technique something like automatism. It's a parallel creative practice I use to better understand myself. The title *Énigmatique* speaks to the fact that it's mysterious, cryptic, an enigma, even for the person who drew it.

Some people may be taken aback by the style, which is completely different from the video and photographic works. Of course, from the point of view of someone who specializes in painting or something, this may not be good art, but I think that everyone can relate to this Art Brut-like mad impulse to create that springs up from within.

I realize there are pros and cons to showing these two extremes, but I designed this exhibition space in the hope that new, unexpected side effects would appear.

The work titled Énigmatique employs a collage technique. What can you say about the, indeed, enigmatic atmosphere generated by the postcard, mysterious box, photograph of white horses and so on in this work?

Another project of mine is titled *Postcards*. Picture postcards are a means of communicating with people far away, or recording memories of places you've visited, relating to the desire to share a moment in your life with someone else. I'm fascinated by these worn-out postcards from the past, and I sometimes visit places shown on old postcards, travel to historical sites or go on foot in search of the address of the sender or recipient, checking what it looks like today while exploring connections between past and present. This is kind of a speculative research and documentary activity that asks "What if...?" and envisions the possibility of creating something by synchronizing and comparing past stories concealed in postcards with the present. Based on the *Postcards* concept, this time I aimed to produce something from which each viewer can assemble their own story, based on fragments of the real world obtained on site, such as journal entries and personal drawings from memory, a small box, and video footage of my visit to the village of Baussen along the French-Spanish border.

Did the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic reach Baussen? And did you personally experience the legacy of holets?

Baussen is actually smaller than a village, it's a hamlet with a population of about 40, so there was almost no contact with the outside world and no one got infected with COVID-19, but my friends told me that during the pandemic lockdown, they had to strictly self-quarantine at home and could not take a single step outside for several weeks, even to take a walk in the woods with nobody around. At the time, police in helicopters were rigorously enforcing the lockdown by patrolling all of Spain and France, even the forest where there are no people whatsoever. When they went for a walk in the woods for a change of pace, at one point they suddenly had to evade the police, and they hid out in their car parked near the forest's edge, barely daring to breathe.

As for the legacy of *holets*, I spoke with a friend about how people in the old days probably imagined *holets* due to night-time optical illusions, like you get when you're climbing a mountain and see faces in the trees. In Japan there are *korpokkur*, little people in Ainu

legends, and *mononoke* and *yokai*, supernatural beings said to live in the forest, are similar phenomena. And in Iceland, they actually have an Elf Heritage Protection Law. A majority of the population believes elves may exist, and national highways are routed around cliffs inhabited by elves to avoid incurring their wrath. I think these beliefs are similar to Japanese Shinto, that is, the ethos of humans interacting with nature in such a way that we coexist.