

## Interview by Vicente Gutierrez

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[Eric Van Hove](#) is one of the eleven artists participating in the New York-to-Tokyo exhibit, [Into the Atomic Sunshine](#). Curated by Shinya Watanabe, the works from this reflective and historically relevant exhibit center around [Article 9](#) of the Japanese Peace Constitution, or Heiwako, and address issues related to Japan in the post-war period. While Article 9 periodically surfaces in Japan's modern body politic, many are reluctant to comment and discuss its connotations, even in an era of perceived political instability in the region. As echoes of possible revision occasionally surface, *Into the Atomic Sunshine* raises awareness of the issues surrounding this crux political factor. Shift took the opportunity to sit down with Belgian artist Eric Van Hove to discuss the artwork he contributed as well as his thoughts on the project.



Courtesy of Eric Van Hove

### **Tell us a bit how you got involved with *Into the Atomic Sunshine*?**

Well, I had met Shinya in 2005 when assisting Yugoslavian artist Sejla Kamberic with whom he was then working with on his previous exhibit. When Shinya decided to mount a show around the issues surrounding Article 9, he contacted me knowing of the Worm Autodafé work I did in Okinawa that same year. He was interested in the fact that a young foreign artist had worked with this while few young Japanese artists seem to have thought about it.

**It's safe to say that most Japanese are reluctant to discuss Article 9 and I'm curious, how do you feel you approach Article 9 differently as a non-Japanese artist?**

Well, I was born in Algeria, raised in Cameroon, I have a Belgian passport, my mother language is French, my name is Scandinavian, my family name is Dutch and I've lived in Japan for almost a decade. I've spend enough time here to think of myself as a Tokyo person. From that, I can play on my foreignness, but whenever I am in Belgium now I'm a foreigner too. I'd rather be considered an émigré, a migrating fragile traveller that is half-way between exile, voyage, field-trip, and forced holiday: I've set myself in self-exile precisely to ponder such issues outside of the perimeter of "nationality". I am interested in pondering the possibility of Duchamp's notion of "regardeur" to gradually find its equivalent in the "foreigner". Local and global are common denominators. As a Belgian, I would understand some would sustain that the Japanese constitution isn't my problem, but as an artist, I believe I have everything to say. Since I partly live here and I understand artists have a social role in society, I guess I even must say something. I'm interested in the social mechanics of it. I would like to say I am unsure if there is ssuch thing as a Japanese artist or a Belgian artist: there are artists, that's all. Passports themselves have existed since less than a hundred years ago... that my art has any national relevance is foolish to begin with.



Courtesy of Eric Van Hove & Shinya Watanabe

### **Lets get into a discussion about the work itself....**

My idea was to try to make a sustainable piece, that isn't only physically sustainable but also historically, philosophically and socially sustainable. Since the work was a community development project, it was to be installed in an old vegetable market in Naha. I quickly noticed that they were burning their bio waste and decided to provide a worm farm that would allow for the recycling of these into fertilizer they could then make profit from, as this would allow for the production money I had received to be passed on to them over time. I did this in collaboration with artist Richard Thomas as a technical advisor.

It is while staying in Okinawa that I discussed about the constitution and the history attached to it. Overnight, I thought about that dynamic and made photocopies of the constitution on recycled paper which I laid onto the bed of worms, and contacted the local TV to use their sensitive microphone to record the munching. Local enthusiasm for the project grew and I decided to broadcast the signal using a local transmitter plugged to my laptop computer. It was like they could tune in and hear the worms digesting the vegetables as well as the problematic Constitution.

### **Some would call that treasonous or blasphemous...**

Yeah, some would, but you might as well take the opposite stance. It can actually also be understood as an optimistic gesture as recycling, reusing. I mean, recycling is not a bad thing- its about a rebirth. Often, my work has a double edge sword and is open ended.



Courtesy of Eric Van Hove & Shinya Watanabe

### **How much would you say that this work is a cleansing ? Did people react as such?**

Well, we can refer to Otiakage here. Where in the Shinto ritualistic tradition a priest sometimes conducts ritual burnings to purify things. It is somehow based on the notion that when you use something for a long amount of time, you invest a lot of energy and emotion into that thing, and that you fear that thing could at one point haunt you back. I can think of the burning of puppets as shown in Chris Marker Sans Soleil for instance.

One night after the show, or when the box had been implemented, I came across two old men standing next to the box and writing messages on tiny pieces of paper. By this time, the worms had become like my little friends and I was even keeping avocado skins from restaurants in my pocket to give them (laughs). They were actually writing down memories about the war, or the names of comrades who had disappeared in the trenches when fighting against the Americans. Then they would feed the messages to the worms and then go listen to it being munched away on the radio. A very strong appropriation of the work I would say.

As an artist, I couldn't be more happy -this gave the work a whole cathartic dimension- here we have the worms helping digesting their painful issues and thoughts. This is why it's too reductive to think of the Japanese Constitution Worm Autodafe as aggressive or blasphemous. For these old men, that's what they saw. They gave their problems to these worms. You can see the purifying nature of it, especially in a culture as animistic as Japan. Even the older women knew about worms' natural purpose and function. Worm recycling was used in some primitive societies in the past, it was something their mothers had told them when they were young girls.

### **Wow. Were there any difficulties or setbacks in the production?**

Well, not really. I built the box, and had Richard give me some advice on setting the worm farm regarding humidity, etc. About the worms, they were shipped from Tokyo but that wasn't anything but logistics. But its interesting, when you cultivate these tiger worms, anything you give them, they'll just eat it so the colony will just keep growing. Although, if the temperature goes too low, they will all die and if you give them nothing, they will eventually die. But the eggs would stay in the soil and when the conditions become good again, the eggs hatch. They are an amazing organism- brilliant and can withstand anything. Almost a metaphor for art in itself! (laughs)

Shinya went to Okinawa recently and told me the piece is still in use as we speak, it's been three years now. It seems that instead of making profit from the project (which is the primary intention and something you definitely don't have to explain if you are in Africa for example), the old women in the market seem to keep the very fertile soil... maybe are they waiting for me to go back and say: Oba-san! dozo! Tsukatte kudaisai yo!



Courtesy of Eric Van Hove & Shinya Watanabe

**Let me take a step back...I feel that while your work takes place in urban environments, I cannot help but notice a tendency to use things that hark back to nature, or are somewhat archaic. For example, the use of elements like sand, shells, rocks, animals, rural people in locations such as the Himalayas, Nepal, Ivory Coast or Eastern European wilderness. Is this a return to something traditional or lost? Can you discuss if this is a current in your work?**

Well, there is probably a romantic play here; I came to Japan not only because it was far, but also looking for salutary complementarities which lead me to thinkers as NISHIDA Kitaro for example. If I am interested by our lost connection to nature, I understand it as a poetic task much like the Transcendentalists did, favouring intuition: I am tempted to recycle the dogmatism inherent to the western medium of contemporary art through pilgrimage-like works and series like the [Metragram Series](#) for instance, which literally intend to in-scribe into the world. In his essay "Walking", Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) named this "nature writing", while saying "He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him (...)". So that is a reason for the presence of these elements in my work, and since I am subject to wanderlust, I partly use lost places to transcend the sort of Eurocentric inherence of today, and reach a spiritual ideal, which is beyond geography. Unlike what you say I've worked as much in urban environment than in pure nature, to hark it back to civilisation...

But you seem to point to the ephemeral nature of my work in your question: I believe these questions about the status of the art object as bound between the ephemeral and the durable exists since times immemorial.

I believe that a society which comes to label an art work as “ephemeral” testifies of its alienated relationship to time: labelling an art work as ephemeral can only be done from the opposite assumption that the side of the observer is “concrete”. The fact that our society came to label art with such a poor adjective is for me only testifying of its growing decadence and abstraction: in Africa for instance, there is no one to speak of an ephemeral art since nobody forgot that life is ephemeral. I might even go further as to say that the ephemeral of life is precisely what is called time. Paintings end in fire, Roman sculptures will be used as building materials by the following empire, while the musical compositions of Bach and Haydn which seem now so concrete were similarly destined, after numerous initial repetitions, to be played only once for a single audience: palimpsests.

Original doesn't exist, that is western utopia, an urban myth.



Courtesy of Eric Van Hove

**And, inquiring minds want to know... In total, you’ve lived here for eight years now, what personally attracts you to Japan in social and cultural terms?**

It was far, wanderlust did the rest. I guess I was following Henri Michaux, as well as the reading of two books: *Monolingualism of the Other* by Jacques Derrida (1998) and Abdelkebir Khatibi's *Amour Bilingue (Love in Two Languages, 1983)*. I decided I needed to lose my mother tongue into a non-European language, and I had heard that Japanese was among the hardest.

**But there is something that pulled you here...**

I was also interested in Japan because of its animistic link to Africa, I feel these are the two only regions in the world that are [Animistic](#). Tokyo is the only city where Animism meets Technology and Modernity since all other cities with Animistic ties outside of Japan are situated in the developing world. Having grown up in Africa, I had an eye for seeing this in action; I think Africa and Japan are more linked than they themselves think they are.

I think Animism is the future.

**And why you decided to complete your studies here?**

I had spent five years studying calligraphy under NAGANO Hideaki at [Tokyo Gakugei University](#) and I felt I needed more time to digest what I had learned. The decision to start doctorate course at [Geidai University](#) came from the meeting with KOBATA Kazue, and the feeling that it was here I should complete the circle of my formation from Contemporary Art to calligraphy and back.