

NINGEN

This research paper aims to present the context, content, methodology and contribution of the practice-based research project NINGEN, realized in Japan and in Brazil in 2006/2007. NINGEN is a multi-channel video installation comprising the video portraits of more than 50 immigrants from Japan who live in Brazil, and of more than 50 immigrants from Brazil, who live in Japan. This work of oral history is a statement on the problematics of language, race, territories and citizenship that derive from the act of migrating, which, by its turn, is caused by a need or a desire for a better life.

The Japanese migration to Brazil started in the beginning of the 20th century and lasted until the 1980s. It is the result of a Japanese/Brazilian government policy enacted in order to relieve Japan, then going through an economic crisis, of part of its poorer population, and providing Brazil with the workforce necessary to replace the slaves in the agricultural industry. The Brazilian migration to Japan started in the 1990s when Brazil was going through an economic crisis, and Japan going through a period of economic boom and in need of cheap labour for its factories.

During a period of six months as a research fellow at the IRCA International Research Center for the Arts, in Japan, and of three months as an independent researcher in Brazil, I met and filmed the stories of Brazilian and Japanese immigrants living in the cities of Kyoto, Osaka, Kobe, and Sao Paulo. Each of those Brazilian and Japanese immigrants narrate, in both Brazilian Portuguese and Japanese, their lives before and after they migrated to Japan and to Brazil. Theirs is a story of economic struggle both in the home country and in their adopted one, as well as of separation from relatives and difficulties of integration into those new societies. However, the stories are not just of suffering, but also of success, with the Japanese community in Brazil becoming a model of efficiency and endurance amid chaotic economic and working conditions; and the Brazilian community in Japan becoming an example of adaptability in the midst of strict social rules that characterise Japan's society.

The word "NINGEN" means "human being" in Japanese, but sounds like the Brazilian Portuguese word "ninguém", which means "nobody". At the same time that in Japanese it describes a human being in general, sounding like "nobody" in Portuguese, it embodies the identity crisis that those immigrants live in both countries. In Brazil, they are considered Japanese. In Japan they are considered Brazilian. This crisis or confusion is what the public experience when they enter the video installation.

Believing in a world trend of immigration and miscegenation, NINGEN is the person who passed from the evolutionary and social states of being, for instance, European, Brazilian, African or Asian, to be the "ningen", the human being free of the tight and uncomfortable labels that nationalities, races and beliefs can be; moving towards a wider concept of identity, one which includes more than it excludes.

(500 words)