

Ningen: a video installation and oral history archive of Brazilian immigrants living in Japan and Japanese immigrants living in Brazil

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This research project was made possible with the financial support of:

International Research Center for the Arts (IRCA)

Kyoto University of Art and Design (KUAD)

Arts Council England

Prêmio Marcantonio Vilaça de Artes Plásticas

Fundação Nacional de Arte (Funarte)

Ministério da Cultura do Brasil (MinC)

The University of Sydney

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Abstract

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 100 immigrants from Brazil who live in Japan, and from Brazil, and from Japan who live in Brazil. 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.

Keywords: arts-based research, migration, video installation, oral history, archive

Introduction

During a period of six months as a research fellow at the International Research Center for the Arts (IRCA), in Japan, and three months as an independent researcher in Brazil, I met and filmed the stories of Brazilian immigrants living in Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe, in Japan; and Japanese immigrants living in the greater São Paulo and Mogi das Cruzes, in Brazil. The Brazilian and Japanese immigrants narrate, in both Brazilian Portuguese and Japanese, about their lives before and after they migrated to Japan and to Brazil. Theirs is a story of economic struggle both in their home country and in their adopted one. It is also a story about their separation from relatives and the difficulties of integrating 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.

In Japan, the project was part of a research residency at the IRCA International Research Center for the Arts of the KUAD Kyoto University of Art and Design (KUAD) (*Kyōto zōkei geijutsu daigaku*) in Kyoto, with the support of the Arts Council England. In Brazil, the project was part of the Marcantonio Vilaça Award for the Visual Arts, given by the Brazilian National Foundation of the Arts (Funarte) and the Brazilian Ministry of Culture (MinC).

Context

Portugal colonised Brazil for hundreds of years, populating the country with white Portuguese people, black slaves from Africa, both groups mixing with the indigenous people. Add to this mix the immigrants coming from other parts of the world, like Europe and Japan, the result of this miscegenation was the formation of a society with a less developed ethnic consciousness and an

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undefined racial profile. Still, the image of the "mulato", the Portuguese word used to describe a person born from a mixture of parents of white and black backgrounds, is the impression that people from other nationalities have of the Brazilian citizen. Also, although Brazilians are relatively relaxed in seeing other races as part of their identity as Brazilians, that diversity does not translate into social equality among all those races. Social differences in Brazil are still very much based on racial differences.

This mixture of ethnicities makes it difficult to visually or physically define the Brazilian people. A Brazilian person can be and look like he or she is from any race or nationality. But what is interesting about this history of colonization is that if somebody is born on the Brazilian territory, this person will be Brazilian, regardless of the background of his or her parents (*jus soli*). This is very peculiar to Brazil. In other parts of the world, this background has precedence to the place of birth (*jus sanguinis*). For instance, people outside Brazil see me more as an Italian, because of my ancestors and my physical appearance, than as a Brazilian, which is my true cultural identity. Certain people even introduce themselves as percentages of races or nationalities, for instance, saying that one is 25% French, 25% Caribbean and 50% British, as if they could literally divide themselves in those parts.

If someone is born in Japan, this person is Japanese only if his or her parents are also Japanese. This makes a large number of immigrants from Korea and China, and their descendents who live in Japan, in some cases for many generations, to still be considered foreigners. Of the immigrants that live today in Japan, the third largest minority is of Brazilians, the pure or mixed descendants of the Japanese immigrants who moved to Brazil since the beginning of the 20th century, in search of a better life.

The Japanese migration to Brazil started with the first ship arriving from the port of Kobe in 1908, and lasted until the 1990s. 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 African slaves in the coffee plantations of the states of São Paulo and Paraná. With the *Lei Áurea* of 1888, the law signed by Princess Isabel, slavery was abolished in Brazil. The government then started promoting immigration from Europe, specially Italy, that would fill the gap left by the exodus of African slaves from the farms. The poor working conditions of the Italian immigrants and maltreatment from farm owners meant that the migration programme was halted by the Italian government of Italy, with the Brazilian government having to look for options elsewhere in Japan.

The working conditions for the Japanese immigrants in Brazil were as bad as they were for the Italians and the African slaves before them, and the promises of land and jobs made by the recruitment process in Japan were never quite what they expected. With cultural differences and language barriers, the integration of the Japanese immigrants in Brazilian life was at the time considered impossible by Brazilians, and took a long time, and a very disciplined effort from the part of the Japanese immigrants, for it to happen. From farm workers, the Japanese organised themselves into communities and bought land, becoming farm owners and setting up businesses. The children they brought with them and the first who were born in Brazil were taught in the Japanese language at schools founded and managed by their own communities. Japanese was also the language spoken at home. During WWI and WWII, in which Japan was on the enemy side in relation to Brazil, the Japanese immigrants in Brazil suffered restrictions similar to the Japanese communities living in concentration camps in the USA during WWII, depicted in the book *Snow Falling on Cedars* (Guterson, 1994) and film (Hicks, 1999). They had restrictions imposed on their movements and on ownership of land and businesses. Japanese newspapers and radio communications with Japan were closed down and the use of the Japanese language was forbidden. However, with time, hard work and perseverance in adversity, and unity as a community, the Japanese immigrants and their descendants, the largest community of Japanese outside of Japan, calculated to be approximately 1.4 million (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística

[IBGE], 2008), made themselves a model of a minority community in Brazil. Today they are professionals, business owners, scientists, academics, politicians, artists and sports personalities.

But some of those descendants were caught up in Brazil's economic woes of the 1980s and 1990s and looked for better life conditions by migrating to Japan. This is often mistakenly referred to as a "return". However, this is not a return since those Brazilian immigrants of Japanese descent were born in Brazil and may have never been to Japan before in their lives.

The Brazilian migration to Japan started in the 1980s 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, especially those hard, dirty and dangerous jobs that the Japanese citizens were unwilling to take. This migration movement became official with the Japanese government supporting the immigrants with working visas in the 1990s. It was believed then that the fact that those Brazilian immigrants were of Japanese descent would make their integration easier. However, most Brazilians living in Japan, in spite of their looks and ancestry, do not speak the Japanese language, and are considered foreigners by the local population. The Embassy of Brazil in Tokyo (EBT) calculates that there is an estimated 320,000 Brazilian immigrants living in Japan, most of them the descendants of Japanese immigrants to Brazil (EBT, n.d.). The cities with the largest concentration of Brazilians in Japan are Toyota and Hamamatsu. The presence of Brazilians in larger cities such as Tokyo and Osaka is smaller, because as immigrants they are required to live in dormitories close to electronics and car factories, where they work. They are recruited in Brazil by agencies connected to those factories and work long hours to earn salaries that are usually lower than the average in Japan, and send money to their families in Brazil. They are known in Japan as *dekasegi*, which in Japanese means "worker away from home". The term implies that the situation is temporary, and that the immigrants' home is in Brazil. Apart from the cultural differences and lack of knowledge of the Japanese language, the cost of education is high for a factory worker on a low wage, and this factor can stop their children from going to Japanese schools or getting an education

at all, also limiting their their integration into Japanese society. Many of the Brazilians that I filmed for my project did not identify themselves as *dekasegi* because they have settled in Japan permanently and not temporarily. But I believe this refusal of some Brazilians to be identified as a *dekasegi* also meant that they had a higher level of command of the Japanese language and were consequently more integrated to Japanese society.

In order to understand the reasons why I chose to work on *Ningen* in Japan and Brazil, it is important to look at my own experience as an economic immigrant in the USA and in Europe.

I was born in Governador Valadares, a Brazilian city of 250,000 inhabitants that is known for having a large percentage of its population migrating illegally to the USA to find work, a trend that started in the 1960s and continued until the 1990s. Everyone living in Valadares has a relative or knows someone who migrated to the USA. At the time, there was a rumour that the American consulate in Brazil would not give visitor visas to Brazilians from my hometown. In the 1990s, my mother, who was the daughter on an Italian immigrant, started a process requesting Italian citizenship for herself and my siblings, a process facilitated by the fact that my grandfather was then still alive, and that his documentation was in order.

After graduating from art school in Belo Horizonte in 1993, I tried to work for some time as a freelance graphic designer, but jobs were scarce, and my financial situation was very difficult. My sister had been living in the USA for ten years, and my best friend for 5 years. So I asked them if they could receive me for the first few months, until I found a job. In 1996 I decided to emigrate to the USA using my Italian passport. I went with the intention to do any of the dirty jobs that immigrants do: dishwasher, waiter, or cleaner. But I was lucky that my best friend lived near the Portuguese neighborhood of Ironbound in Newark, NJ, where the residents spoke Portuguese. I found work as a graphic designer for a small printing house where I worked for its Portuguese-speaking clients. Six months later I moved to New York City, and lived and worked there illegally for

four years. In 2000 I was discovered by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and left the country to avoid being deported. I moved to London, England, where I lived legally as an Italian for 12 years. During my stay in London I continued working as a graphic designer, and became more active in my career as an artist, working with a range of issues including migration. I also applied to a number of residencies and awards. When the opportunity came to apply for a residency at the IRCA / KUAD in Japan in 2005, I proposed to investigate the situation of the Brazilian immigrants in Japan. I knew vaguely that there was a movement of Japanese descendants from Brazil moving to Japan to work in factories, so I thought this could be an interesting art project to pursue.

Content

My proposal for the IRCA / KUAD was exploratory in nature. I did not know exactly what shape a project on Brazilian immigrants living in Japan would take, but I knew it would be an investigation on their situation at the time.

On my arrival in Kyoto, an administrative officer from the IRCA offered to introduce me to a Brazilian woman studying for a PhD in Architecture at the Kyoto University. She was living with her French husband, also a researcher, and their young daughter, who was born in Japan. This Brazilian student offered to take me to Nagoya, where she said I would find a larger population of Brazilians than in Kyoto. She needed to go to Nagoya to resolve personal problems at the Brazilian Consulate, and invited me to take the bullet train and go for the day and see the Brazilian area of this city. Walking in the streets of Nagoya, she casually asked me if I could spot the Brazilians. I looked around and said no. She told me that there were Brazilians around, who looked Japanese, but were slightly overweight in comparison to Japanese people due to a different diet. She also mentioned the way Brazilians walked, gestured, and talked, as being different from the Japanese.

For a person who had a friend who was of second-generation Chinese at high school, and another who was of second-generation Japanese at university, I never thought that their physical appearances made them less Brazilian. However, in Nagoya, I was surprised by my inability to recognise people of my own nationality, because there they look Japanese like everyone else. This idea of looking the same (Japanese) but acting and being different (Brazilian) caught my attention and I decided that I wanted to work with this confusion that I felt in Nagoya, and my initial idea for an artwork was to create a video installation showing Brazilian immigrants speaking in both Portuguese and Japanese. It was only later, by filming the persons who collaborated in this project that I became aware of the identity crisis caused by both migrating movements and its consequences in their lives. As descendants of Japanese-born immigrants in Brazil, they look Japanese and are considered by the non-Japanese Brazilian population as Japanese. As descendants of Japanese-born immigrants in Brazil, they were raised in a culturally mixed environment (Japanese and Brazilian) and grew up acquiring the cultural traits that any other Brazilian would have, consequently being considered Brazilian in Japan. I decided that the focus of my project would be exactly that: The identity crisis of being both Japanese in Brazil, and Brazilian in Japan. I wanted the project to question the ability of the viewers to recognise the nationalities of the persons speaking in the videos through their voices, uses of language, mannerisms and physical appearance. But more than that, the project would question the relevance of nationalities in a global world.

Methodology

a) Meeting and filming the participants in Japan

To start the project in Japan, I went to Kobe and visited *Comunidade Brasileira de Kansai* (CBK) (Brazilian Community of Kansai), located in the same building of the Kobe Center for Overseas Migration and Cultural Interaction, where, in the beginning of the 20th century, Japanese from all over the country would enlist themselves and their families, be sorted according to health (many

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family members were separated due to this practice), and trained, in a process lasting weeks, before they walked down the hill to the port where a ship was waiting to take them to Brazil. On the first of the many visits I did to CBK, the community centre was holding its annual Emigration Festival with an exhibition of old photographs and documents, a film screening, a tour and talks. This festival and other subsequent visits to CBK were registered in a project that I was working simultaneously to NINGEN called *Ambitious Japan*, a photographic diary of my stay in Japan, looking to understand this country's identity through the photographic image. On this occasion I met CBK's director Marina Matsubara, and asked her for help with my project, in introducing me to other Brazilians living in Japan.

In the same event I also met the first person that I filmed for this project, Lissa Yamaguchi, who at the time owned a kindergarten in Osaka. Lissa invited me to go to her school, where I set up my camera on a tripod, and sitting on a tatami, I asked her the same thing that I asked every person filmed for this project: to tell me about their lives before and after moving to Japan, first in Portuguese, then in Japanese. From Lissa I was expecting just a few minutes of a superficial overview of the story of her life. I was still very set on the idea of using the voices, language and faces to produce confusion in the video installation, but in the moment when Lissa started talking about her life, and how her father had died from a shot wound in an armed robbery in his shop in São Paulo, I understood that there was something else as valuable as my artistic statement on the Brazilian Japanese identity crisis. Lissa spoke for longer than I expected of her personal experiences that were deeply connected to her ancestors' migration to Brazil, and her own move to Japan. This was also the moment when I first questioned the ethics of what I was doing. It became clear to me that I could not just use her voice in my artistic statement. I would have to show what it was that she wanted to say. I had my message and she had hers. This was going to be not only my artwork, but a collaboration.

In Japan, I filmed 42 persons in a period of three months, usually one or two persons per day, in the cities of Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe. One person would suggest filming the other, and help with introductions.

I initially tried to keep the gender and age groups balanced, but after some time I gave up, letting the group grow naturally. Most participants are of Japanese descent, *nisei* (second generation) or *sansei* (third generation), some are of mixed race, and some are not of Japanese descent. Many were students at the Kyoto University, two were professors, a few were professionals who owned their own businesses and some were office and factory workers. Their ages ranged from 18 to 60 years old, with only one child being filmed at the request of the child when she saw her mother being filmed, and with the approval and supervision of the mother.

All of the persons who collaborated in this project responded to the same open request that was to talk about their life before and after they moved to Japan, first in Portuguese and then in Japanese. Before starting I told them that they could talk for as long as they wanted, and that I would only listen. I also told them that the videos would not be edited for the exhibition, so that any mistakes that they made in their speech or pauses for thinking would be included in the final work. I did not want my views to interfere in the videos through editing. I wanted their stories to stay as original as possible. I also showed a mock up of how I wanted the exhibition to be and the basic concept of the artwork to every person that I filmed.

In the videos, they speak of difficulties in finding jobs in Brazil, but also of the difficulties in adapting to the strict rules governing Japanese workplace and society. Some of them may have started as the temporary *dekasegi* working in factories, but moved on to occupy better professional positions and a permanent status in Japanese society. The research students (Masters and PhD) on Japanese scholarships, and postdoctoral researchers, mostly in the area of Science, have a different experience, being in a privileged situation of working on an activity that is seen as more

intellectual. Other Brazilian non-Japanese professionals filmed for this project were teaching Brazilian culture at universities, studying for a PhD and working as a pilot for a Japanese airline. One of the persons I filmed was a student of Japanese-German descent and was filmed in German and Japanese. Some have lived through historical events such as the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake Disaster that destroyed large areas of Kobe. All my negotiations with the persons filmed were informal and verbally agreed. I never asked anyone to sign a document giving me permission to show the videos.

b) Meeting and filming the participants in Brazil

When I proposed my project for the IRCA in Japan in 2006, I was unaware of the proximity of the 100 years of the start of the Japanese migration to Brazil, and the celebrations that were being organised in Brazil for 2008. At the end of my research fellowship at the IRCA, I applied for an award from the Brazilian National Foundation for the Arts (Funarte). My project was chosen and I travelled to Brazil in 2007 to realise it.

In Brazil, filming also lasted for three months. My start was at the Japan Foundation in the city of São Paulo, where I went to see a presentation on the celebrations being organised for the centenary, and where I met its director, who introduced me to Japanese immigrants in the city. The method to find participants for the project was similar to the one used in Japan. One person introduced me to the next. All of the persons filmed in Brazil were *issei*, Japanese immigrants who were born in Japan and moved to Brazil. Because the migration started early in the 20th century, most of them were elderly and retired. They spoke of the difficulties of settling in Brazil, a place that was so different to Japan, without any knowledge of the language and lacking the most basic resources. Many spoke of their agricultural background, first as farm workers and then as farm owners. A few mentioned the problems they had as Japanese immigrants living in Brazil during WWII. Two of the persons I filmed in São Paulo were survivors of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima

and Nagasaki. Some had lost family members to the *Shindo Renmei*, an underground organisation whose members denied the surrender of Japan to the Allied forces. Its members killed and injured a number of Japanese immigrants who were better informed and spoke openly of Japan's surrender. Tiekō Koshihira, a Japanese immigrant who moved to Brazil with her family at the age of 4, and who I found living in a suburb of São Paulo with her daughter's family, narrates the story of a family member being killed by members of the *Shindo Renmei*. Tiekō was one of the last persons to be filmed for this project in Brazil. Although many of the stories narrate the difficulties to adapt to the natural and cultural environments of Brazil, they also show their accomplishments by the positions of wealth and influence that many of them have come to occupy, later in life, in Brazilian society. I also filmed very young Japanese students and professionals who moved to Brazil recently to study at Brazilian universities or work at Japanese companies with offices in Brazil.

c) Technical considerations

The length of the videos range from 5 minutes (the shortest) to 2 hours, depending on the will of each participant. The videos were filmed using a small miniDV camera, miniDV tapes, a small microphone and a tripod. The participants and I would be the only persons present during filming. This small equipment and crew set up facilitated my mobility and made the participants more relaxed when speaking in front of the camera. To speed up the video production the location where we filmed was the participants' choice, usually their homes or workplaces. However, I was asked a few times to film in public places.

I wanted the videos to look like passport photographs, so I filmed all my subjects in the portrait format. As an art photographer, the quality of the image in relation to lighting and composition are very important to me. I usually want my images to be beautiful. In this project, I had to give up my desire for the perfect image, since most of the videos were filmed at locations that I have not been

before, so preparation was minimal. In most cases I used natural light, or artificial light from the participant's own home or workplace. Background noise was also a common problem during filming.

d) Exhibition: video installation and research material

The first part of the project, realised in Japan with Brazilian immigrants, was shown at the Galerie Aube of the Kyoto University of Art and Design in the summer of 2006. The ideal installation would have each person's video running in a loop, on a flat screen TV, at the eye level of a standing viewer, the image scale at 1:1. Because of costs, the final installation used seven cathode ray tube (CRT) TVs turned on their sides to fit the portrait format of the videos, connected to seven DVD players. To achieve the effect of confusion that I had planned initially, the sound of the voices of all of the seven persons speaking needed to be heard in the gallery, simultaneously. At the same time, I wanted each of the person's stories to be heard, if the viewer chose to do so. In order to achieve that, I separated one sound channel to be heard at the gallery through the TV speakers, and another sound channel to be heard via a headphone. By putting the headphone on his head, the viewer would isolate the sound of the person speaking in front of him from the cacophonous noise of the gallery, being able to understand that personal narrative. The videos were transferred to DVDs unedited and played continuously in a loop, one person per screen per day. The DVDs were changed every day, so there were different groups of people speaking throughout the installation. The exhibition was unmaned, so I had to do those changes myself.

In the exhibition I also included the screening of an old film used by the Japanese government to recruit immigrants to move to Brazil and books that I found during the project on the themes of the Japanese migration to Brazil and the Brazilian migration to Japan. Among the books were *Strangers in the Ethnic Homeland* (Tsuda, 2003), *No One Home* (Linger, 2002), *Japan's Minorities* (Weiner, 1996) , and *Circle K Circles* (Yamashita, 2001). The film and books were complementary to the video installation, showing background information and other research related to the theme of the

exhibition. The copy of the film was given to me by Marina Matsubara of CBK, and shows the process of application, triage and training before departure to Brazil. The books were the equivalent of a small literature review from the sociological and anthropological perspectives, one of the first signs of the connection between my project and arts-based academic and interdisciplinary research.

Contribution

The most immediate contribution of this arts-based research project was to the participants who had the opportunity to have their stories heard during filming and during the exhibition, and to myself who had the privilege to listen to all of them. I felt from them a need to tell their stories and a sense of relief by sharing both their sad and happy life experiences resulting from their migration. They wanted to be heard. In Japan, personal copies of the videos were made and presented to each participant.

This project also shows how important it is that non-academic institutions such as the IRCA in Japan, or the Akademie Schloss Solitude, in Germany, offer opportunities for exploratory arts-based research. Their residency programmes provide artists with the space and time to find out what it is that they are going to research, before they even start on the research itself. This is a model that academic environments could consider too vague to be approved. Arts-based research institutions such as those at art faculties at universities may require that a research plan be completed from the start. This openness for the development of an arts-based research project before its execution is an important aspect about artistic research that we could learn from institutions that are not considered academic.

The first part of the project filmed in Japan was shown as a video installation in Kyoto in the summer of 2006. In 2009, it was exhibited for a second time at the group exhibition VOST, curated by Marika Dermineur and hosted by iMAL Center for Digital Cultures and Technology, in Brussels, Belgium.

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In 2007, the project was filmed in Brazil, but to this date, it has not yet been exhibited, and personal copies of the videos have not yet been presented to the participants. However, I hope to return to this project in Brazil in the future to exhibit, publish a book and present the personal copies of the videos to the participants and their families. I also hope that this archive of oral history becomes complete and available to study by other researchers.

In the past, the truth of the accounts registered in the videos has been questioned by academics, with the argument that anyone would act to look better on screen, probably omitting or fabricating information about themselves. This is possible, but I see this as a natural human reaction to being photographed or filmed, one that does not invalidate the veracity of a story told to the camera. I was actually very surprised by the interviewees' openness to disclose facts about their lives, facts many of us would have preferred to keep private. While many political voices today portray migration as an opportunistic attack on their country's resources, the subjects of this video installation were telling me of the experiences they had to go through, the difficult choices that had to be made resulting from a necessity for a better life. Migrating should be seen as natural. Plants and animals migrate, why shouldn't we humans?

This contradiction that this group of people present to us and especially to the Japanese society, urges us to seek a transformation in our status from citizens of a specific nation/territory, to citizens of the world. This crisis that the Brazilians of Japanese descent experience in Japan, directs us to a worldwide trend of racial and cultural mixture that is happening through contemporary waves of immigration, a trend that creates pressure for a change in how we human beings define our territories and identities in a global society.

The word *ningen* of the title 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.

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