

For people who don't understand English with Japanese accent

Ghost in silence (Script)

I was born in Japan and I have been living in Europe for over a decade. I am making art. I am doing art in a cross-cultural context, between the West and the East.

I've read an article saying that all good artists were migrants. The vast majority of the artists who left a significant impact on the twentieth-century crossed national boundaries during the course of their career once or more.

Wassily Kandinsky
Constantin Brancusi
Paul Klee
Joaquín Torres García
Sonia Delaunay
Marcel Duchamp
Kurt Schwitters
Hans Richter
Josef Albers
Sophie Taeuber-Arp
Man Ray
Naum Gabo
Max Ernst
Roberto Matta
László Moholy-Nagy
Alexander Calder
Louise Bourgeois
Meret Oppenheim
Maya Deren
Lygia Clark
Helio Oiticica
Jorge Orta
Öyvind Fahlström
Niki de Saint Phalle
Eva Hesse
Hannah Wilke
Sigmar Polke
Ana Mendieta
Tania Bruguera
Cecilia Vicuña
Carlos Cruz Díez
Jesús Rafael Soto
Liliana Porter
Luis Camnitzer
Wilfredo Lam
Félix González-Torres
George Balanchine
Ulises Carrión
Miguel-Ángel Cárdenas
James Joyce
Samuel Beckett
Raoul Ruiz
Amedeo Clemente Modigliani
Marlene Dumas
Nam June Paik
On Kawara
Yoko Ono
and probably many more.

The sense of humor is one of the most important elements within my art practice. When I moved from Japan to the Netherlands, I started noticing that, every time I used my sense of humor, this didn't reach a European audience in the manner I intended.

My jokes came across differently, and people were often puzzled by my words, because certain meanings got lost in the process of being assigned into another cultural context. However, an interesting phenomenon occurred in this process. Another humorous layer got created on top of this misinterpretation.

Whenever we have the ability to understand both meanings in this cross-cultural context, we allow ourselves to grasp a paradox in our understanding. As an artist, I allow this paradox to be part of my work.

A few years ago, a Belgium guy decided to do research about the Japanese sense of humor and traveled to Japan. He met a Japanese woman there and told her an example of a European sarcastic joke about a rather boring concert.

‘Did you have fun last night? I think it was really really good!’

Then she answered.

“If you say that kind of joke, here we call it a lie“

Western civilization is based on the foundation of Greek philosophy. The Western stance towards life is that people have always had curiosity to understand the world. Therefore they have developed science resulting in a rather logical understanding to appreciate the world around them.

On the contrary, East-Asian stance toward life is that the world is too complex and obscure to control. It is constantly changing and is full of contradictions. From this stance, it is more useful to be able to cope with the complexity, continuously at every moment, rather than to have a logical understanding. Because of that, the style of dialogues or compiled short stories have become the most suitable way to make sense of the world.

The following is an example of obscure answers from a cryptic Zen dialogue.

“Why do you come to this place?”

“To seek enlightenment”

“Why have you not found it?”

“Because I seek it”

“How will you find it?”

“By not seeking”

“Where will you find it?”

“In no place.”

“When will you find it?”

“At no time.”

The writing system of the Japanese language consists of three main components. One of them is “kanji” which is of Chinese origins. For this reason, as a Japanese person, I am able to understand quite a few Chinese characters which all have individual meanings.

ひらがな(Only developed in Japan) カタカナ(Used for transcription of foreign words)
漢字(Adopted Chinese characters)

In Chinese, the word 'humor' is written in the combination of 2 Chinese characters, 幽 (yōu) which literally means “Ghostly” and 默 (mò) which literally means “Silence”. This modern Chinese word was created by a bilingual writer, Lin Yutang, who was called a *Master of Chinese humor* after his activities in the 1930’s Shanghai literary scene. He recorded that there was no Chinese equivalent for the English word ‘humor’. Therefore he created the phonetic equivalent yōumò (yōumò) by using two vague meanings of Chinese characters, ghostly and silence. I believe, it was a sign of his poetical intervention.

The sense of humor in Chinese and Japanese is very vague, almost impossible to grasp, but there must be something existing in this silence.

Inspired by Lin Yutang, I would like to translate 幽默 (yōu mò) as 'Ghost in Silence'.

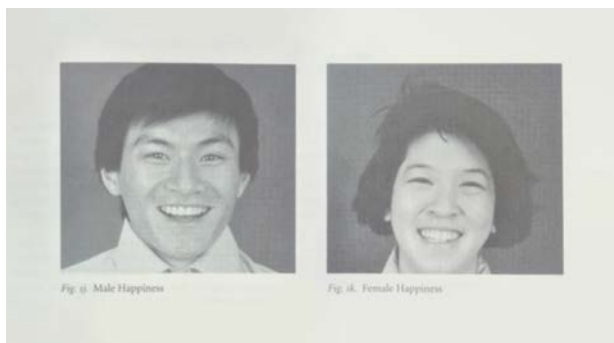
Japanese ghosts have traditionally no feet. Western ghosts have feet but are transparent.

Once my German music teacher asked me why I pause the music at the position of the rest sign that I had added in the music score. I couldn’t answer because I didn’t use the rest sign as an indication to pause the music, rather I meant to insert silence into the music. According to my teacher, the functionality of the rest sign is to halt the flow of music and not to present silence.

But silence has meanings in my country and there is no sign of silence in musical notation.

Silence can exist without speech, but speech can’t exist without silence. The word would be without depth, if the background of silence was missing.

In general, humor provokes laughter and provides amusement. And as a result, it evokes feeling of happiness. According to an American scientific research, this image is the typical Japanese expression of happiness.



I would like to translate this happiness into Emoticons, a combination of the words “emotion” and “icon”. In common use, the happiness emoticon is like this, tilting one's head to the left.

:-) :)

Japanese users have developed them in a peculiar manner. Their happiness emoticons are like this.

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(/^\▽^)/

(> ▽ <) (≧▽≦)

(>~<):(>_<)

Do you really see them as happy faces? I’ve personally started to see them as expressions of something else. In today’s world of cyber communication, the Japanese icon of happiness has developed like a chain reaction. After repeated manipulations, I see that the emotion of happiness has changed, becoming neutral, almost obscure.



These are pictures of the Chinese monks; known as *Hanshan* and *Shide* in China and as *Kanzan* and *Jittoku* in Japan. *Hanshan* is a legendary figure associated with a collection of poems from the 9th century in the Taoist and Zen tradition, and *Shide* is his close friend. No one knows who they were, or when they lived and died. However everybody knows them as laughing characters, since they were depicted in many paintings having such an expression.

After the 13th century, Japanese painters also began to draw them. How to depict their ambiguous laughter became a trend in the Japanese art world. Their laughter is very mysterious and enchanting since people find happiness as well as sadness in their expression.

Let us check the opposition of happiness within emoticons.
In the common use, the unhappiness emoticon is like this.

:-(

In Japan, unhappiness emotion looks like this.

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(◦・∧・◦)
(◦'∩'∩◦)
∩'(:3 /∩ ∩)/∩
(◦○∩◦)

Personally, I see them as laughing faces.

During my research about Japanese humor, I got interested in one comedy movie called “The Apology King” released in 2013. This is a story of a man who is fascinated with act of apology, especially, the utmost traditional Japanese one, called “*Dogeza*”.

This picture I’ve found is a good example to explain the usage of *Dogeza*. The CEOs of Tokyo Electric Power Company were apologizing to the victims of the Fukushima power plant accident. As you can see from the image, this moment is very serious and they show that they are extremely sorry.



However, in the comedy story, the man who plays *Dogeza* is portrayed like this. A caricatured overreaction makes him look funny. When he is sent to apologize to a primitive foreign country to do *Dogeza* as a diplomat, here *Dogeza* had an opposite meaning and was seen as an insult from the local people. So, his act of apology caused even a bigger conflict between the two countries.

Any meaning can easily flip around depending on one's perspective. And this is exactly what provokes laughter in most comedy stories.

The most common word we use to apologize is sorry. And this word- "Sorry" - has multiple meanings and usages. For instance, in the Japanese society, in order to show your respect to another person, you put yourself down by saying "sorry". When you put yourself in a lower position, the position of the other becomes higher than yours. So, by saying sorry in the conversation, you are actually showing your respect to that person. To be polite, it is very important that the other person replies back the word "sorry". After both people have shown mutual respect to each other by saying "sorry", then they both have an equal position again. This is how and why we repeat the word "sorry".

If one would not understand this peculiar manner, "sorry" will be perceived as an apology. However, from a specific angle, it is a manner to properly greet each other.

Most humorous jokes have a sort of social function. People often use jokes as social tools to introduce themselves to strangers. However, Japanese tend to make jokes only after the strangers have become their friends. When a Japanese person meets someone for the first time, one prefers to clarify the distance between oneself and the stranger by showing humbleness and respect. For example, by saying the word 'sorry' at first.

A few years ago, in a conference entitled 'Intercultural encounters with Japan', one American researcher stated as follow:

If there was an all-American audience, I might begin my presentation with a joke. However if there was an all-Japanese audience, I might better begin with an apology.

And for me now, to end this narration in front of a mixed group of people, let me please apologize for not making a joke in English.

I am sorry.

I don't think my "Sorry" with the Japanese accent is the same sorry with your English accent.

ソーリー (Sorry)

I will forever keep my Japanese accent in my English, and this is the standard language of my communication.

ソーリー (Sorry)

I behave like a Westerner after being away so long.

「ソーリー」 Sorry

Once my country tried to be an empire in East-Asia to catch up with and surpass the West.

『ソーリー』 Sorry

I was not yet born in the time of the Second World War but I have to apologize as a Japanese to the neighborhood countries.

ソーリー ‘Sorry’

My country is counted as a Western one even though it is located in the East, because we are economically in the West.

ソーリー “Sorry”

I think I am a leftist but the leftists in my country call me a rightwing.

ソーリー = (Sorry)

I try to apologize with the Japanese emoticon, but you might recognize them as smiling faces.

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I apologize for my deed (act) but I might do the same again. Then I will apologize again.

Sorry sorry sorry

I am greeting as well as apologizing.

My narrative is a ghost.

All that we say is going to dissolve into silence.