

I investigate the issues of globalization and its impact on the transformation of cultural diversity, indigenous knowledge, bio-diversity, food security and identity. I am in search of a reciprocal balance between art, academic theory, creative intervention and human experience.



Transmigration of the SOLD 2008

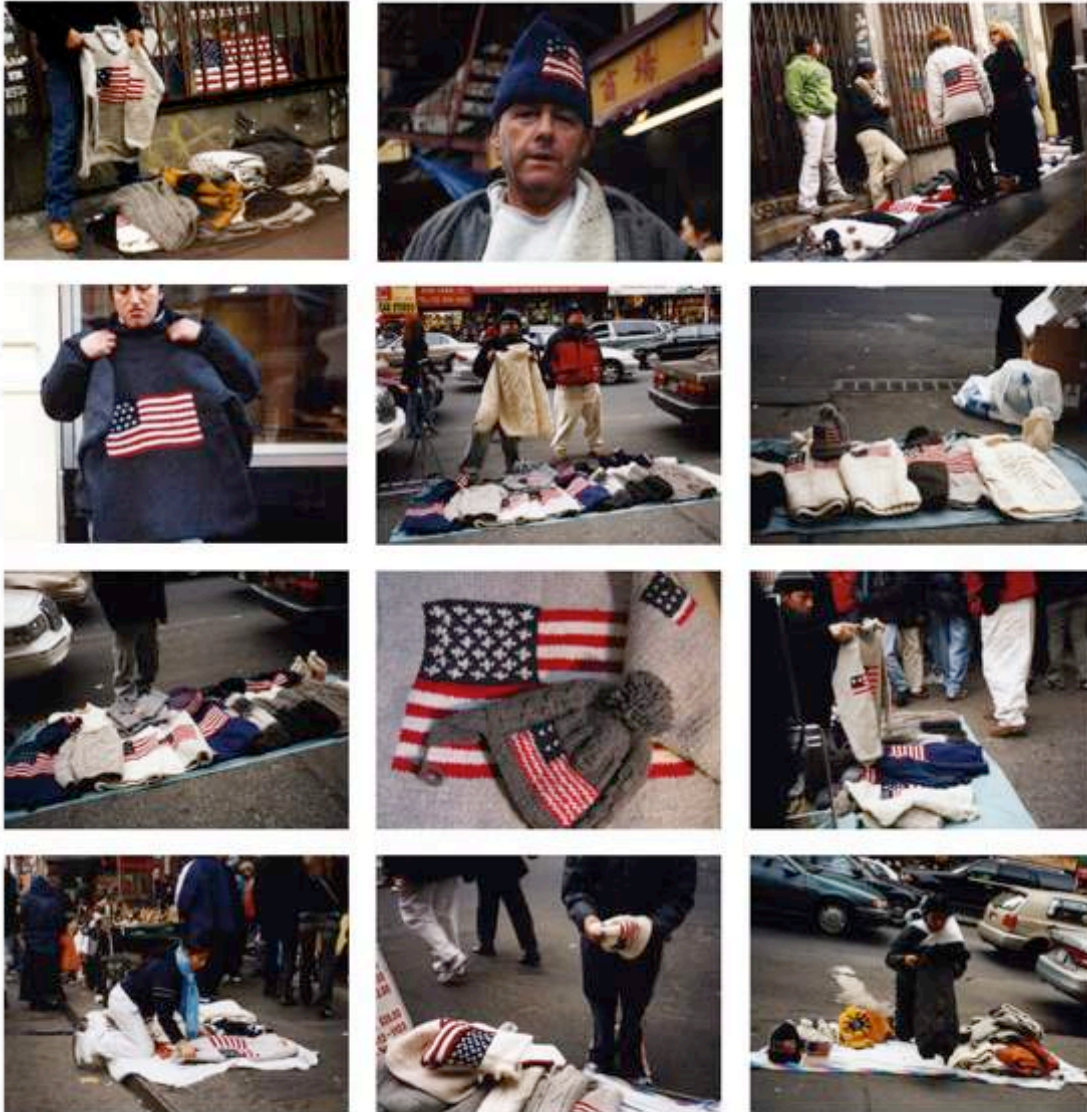
“Transmigration of the SOLD” is a long-term project that explores the human costs and benefits that lie behind imported-exported Andean wool products, probing the effects of global trade on native culture, craft tradition and value systems in capitalism. It incorporates public intervention performance art, anthropological research and video installation.

PROJECT SUMMERY

Transmigration of the SOLD is based on my encounter with a flux of Ecuadorian and Peruvian illegal immigrant street vendors who were selling hand-knitted wool sweaters that were made in the Andes Mountains and were decorated with American flag designs in the wake of 9-11 on Canal Street in New York. Fascinated by this market mutation of cultural ideology and defensive patriotism, I devised a series of works in various locations, as a matrix for opening a more humanistic dialogue on globalization. The project consists of four phases and will finally be rematerialized as a multi-media installation that incorporates multi-channel video projections comprised of images from each phase, research material, and archival documentation, in conjunction with the material elements of the installation to provide an associative and lyrical layer to the work as a whole. Phase One, working closely with the artisans, I commissioned the fabrication of sweaters in Ecuador and had them imported to the US (2008).

Phase Two (currently on-going), audience interactive performance on Canal Street where I am ceremoniously unraveling and winding the yarn into big balls of wool, to be used in subsequent installations. Phase Three returns the wool to the Andes where I will collaborate with local cooperatives to create thousands of hand-crocheted red, white and blue flowers, representing the colors of the potato flower, a traditional Andean motif symbolizing a “source of life,” still celebrated in the Quecha Indigenous communities. Phase Four “re-imports” the re-constructed products (flowers) ultimately returning them to the U.S. marketplace.

CONTEXT



Canal Street, New York City 2001 Photo documentation: Yoko Inoue

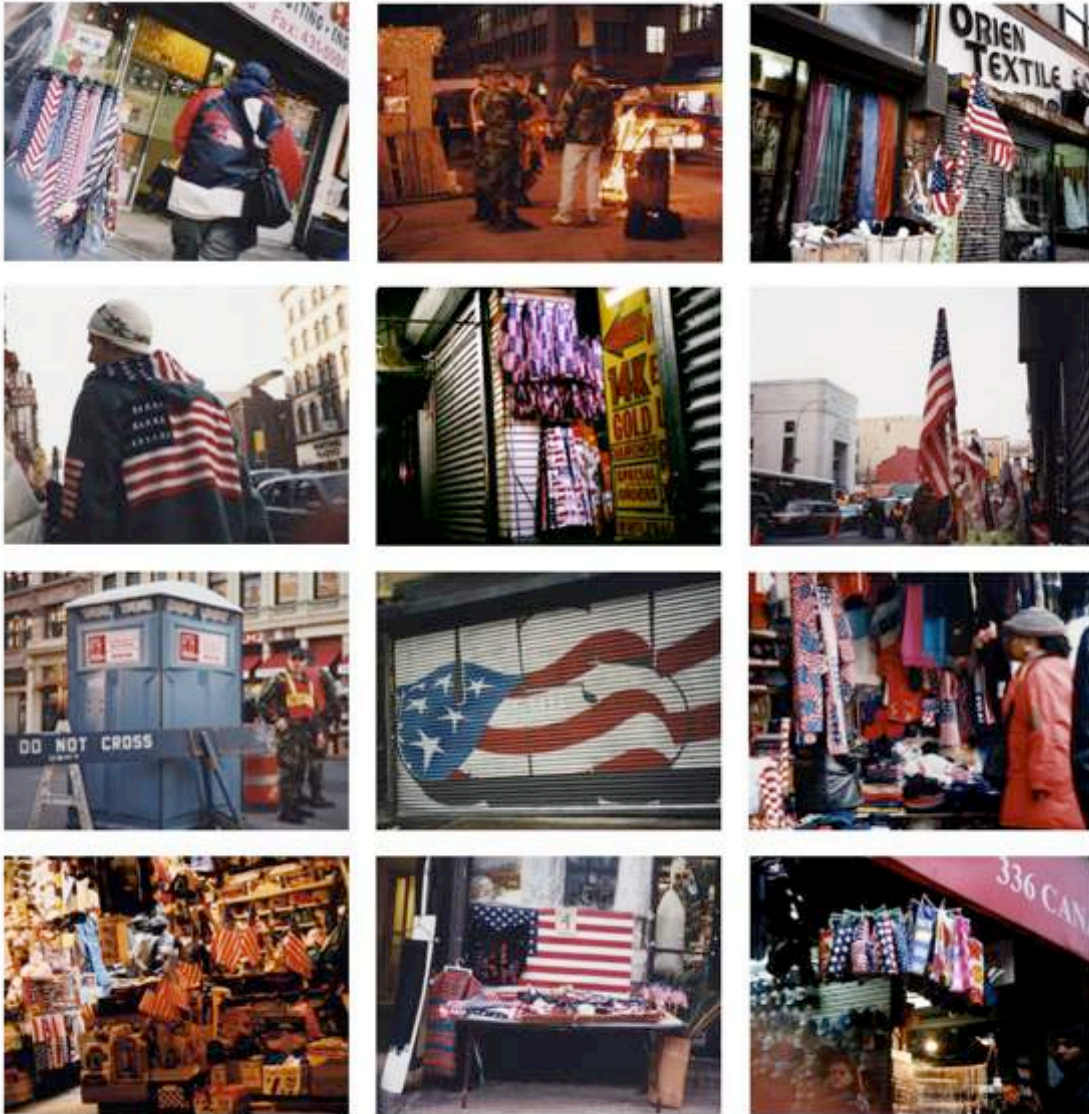
My work reflects cultural merging. While assisting archivists at an ethnological museum, and as an immigrant working next to other immigrants, I learned first-hand the complexity of assimilation and cultural identity. My concern with fair trade and international labor issues developed during my experience at an environmental trading company, as a researcher of resources, product origins and production integrity. Shortly after 9/11, I was commissioned by Art in General to pursue the project entitled "Invisible Price Tags." I set up a shopping cart "store" on Canal Street examining issues of transience and territory of immigrant street vendors, questioning the hidden costs and values of mass-produced goods of unknown origin/trade routes, and negotiating the price point with my audience. There I met the sweater vendors and observed how they take part in the US economy and their chameleon-like use of both their native culture and American culture in their selling strategies.



Invisible Price Tags

Art in General on Canal 2001-2002

Instead of examining my subject from the purely academic theoretical perspective, I question by what means artists can participate in shaping dialogue about cultural identity issues. I establish a situation where the subjects can engage my work from a familiar commercial perspective (i.e. empowering business/shopping mentality), creating a transitional bridge to an aesthetic perspective leading to an open ended dialogue. This provides opportunities for collecting peripheral information that goes beyond academic research, incidental and oral knowledge that can only be elicited on site. This project can only develop through the interaction of the social forces that all bring into play.



The events of 9/11 brought to the forefront issues of immigrant identity and assimilation. Immediately after the terrorist attacks, the French newspaper *Le Monde*, published an editorial titled “We Are All Americans” on September 12th, calling for global solidarity. In his address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People on September 20, 2001, president George W. Bush tried to impose upon the world his good-vs-evil rhetoric, “Either You Are With Us Or You Are With the Terrorists.”

The over simplifications that arose as a result of the fear and anger during the nation’s initial reaction pushed many to step behind the image of the American flag to deflect misguided attention to one’s ethnicity, national heritage, religion, or political stance. The immigrant dream of freedom in a multicultural America was suddenly interrupted by the heightened fervor of nationalistic discourse. On Canal Street, I saw that many store owners and vendors of various ethnic backgrounds, had strategically placed American flags on their windows or carts. Flag-themed merchandise, often made in foreign countries, flooded the street, capitalizing on consumer patriotism. Because the need to clearly identify “us” versus “other” became a matter of urgency, flag pins and flag-adorned garments became convenient identifiers.

The fragility of the multicultural dynamics within the United States after 9/11 caused me to question the sense of security I had taken for granted as a recent Japanese immigrant and how I could define myself as “American” within the new political and economic order.



I pursue projects under the guise of “street vending” with in-kind support from local small businesses. The interaction with innumerable passers-by in the context of street commerce during my on-site performances convinces me of the power of a face-to-face exchange of ideas. Through this grass-roots activity I can effectively address intricate components of this project. The topic of this project is pertinent to people of all nations who are not normally engaged by contemporary art practices. My primary audiences, in situ, are consumers, tourists, vendors, business owners on Canal Street and the community of the sweater makers in the Andes.





Sweater makers, Otavalo Ecuador 2008

Photo documentation: Yoko Inoue

I have chosen Canal Street as a performance venue because of the prominence of tourists, immigrant vendors in the cycle of commerce and its local, voluminous foot traffic. I established a relationship with a storeowner who can secure an in-kind, long-term sidewalk retail space.





Weekly performance on Canal Street involves unraveling imported products and winding the yarn into large balls, reversing the act of making/selling in the context of marketplace.



I think of a yarn as a material metaphor for a state of flux. While witnessing the indigenous worker's hand knitting processes on one hand, reversing the processes of "interlocking" the yarn to create sweaters or flags is an attempt to disentangle the threads of different histories and ultimately understand "American" identity.

Paradoxically, the patriotic motifs of the garments were inaccurate. Flags were knitted with the wrong number of stripes and fleur-de-lis for stars. This fact often went unnoticed by the consumer. I befriended an Ecuadorian middleman and established plans for fabrication and importation. I visited his Andean indigenous community in Otavalo, Ecuador three times to observe the production process and the dynamics of their socio-economical structure. Over the 7 years of intermittent travels, I witnessed how global market shifts affected their production strategies and their use of indigenous cultural identity as a marketing tool while incorporating distinctly American iconography.

Phase II of the project "Transmigration of the SOLD" is a performance on Canal Street in which I am unraveling all of the clothing which the middleman helped me to import. By winding the yarn into big wool balls, I intended to "return" these finished sweater products back to the state of raw material, readying it for reworking by the workers in the Andean indigenous communities.



Global Fabrics and Common Threads

"Transmigration of the SOLD," an installation for the exhibition "Global Fabrics and Common Threads" curated by Melissa Levin / LMCC, Ise Cultural Foundation 2009

Medium: 500 woolen sweaters and hats, yarn, wool hand-crocheted flowers, Otavalo local women's garments, hand-truck, collapsible shipping cart, video and 35 mm slide projections.

Dimensions: approx. 450 sqf.

I exhibited an installation as a "progress report" to create a platform for critical feedback. Components consist of 500 hand-knitted woolen sweaters and hats that were fabricated in Otavalo, Ecuador). Rotating color 35mm-slide projections juxtapose portraits of knitters in the Andes and documentations of South American immigrant vendors on Canal Street selling their American Flag sweaters. Projected on the wall is a silent video featuring my "unraveling." Each ball represents one garment/body. Yarn, being a synonym for "story," becomes the vehicle to bring forth anecdote, the narrative behind the product, and the socio-political climate.



Global Fabrics and Common Threads





How American? Anonymous/Self/Portrait Momena Art, Brooklyn NY 2006

Title: How American? Anonymous/Self/Portrait

Medium: commissioned oil painting, oil-charcoal drawing by a street painter, embroidery, ink drawing, crocheted woolen flowers from sweaters etc.

Dimensions: installation approx. 350 sqf. / oil painting 48" x 60" drawing 20" x 24" embroidery 12.5" x 12.5"

I created an installation comprised of a set of portraits that act as commemorative and archival documentation. Each work investigates the complexities of ethnic assimilation through the masking of identity and an assumed patriotism driven by market forces, the subject matter addressed in "Transmigration of the SOLD." Related to performance work, I myself become the subject matter and commissioned other artists (including an anonymous street painter) to make portraits of me wearing a wool hat knitted with American Flag which conceals my own identity and ethnicity. I added embroidery to portraits. While simultaneously relinquishing specific control of my project through the delegation of the work's execution to others, I experimented with the approach of portraiture, the inverted logic of paying to portray the idea of immigrant non-identity and, in some cases, with the process of posing for the portraits, initiating ideas about self awareness as an immigrant and, as an artist in the marketplace.

Crocheted yarn flowers are made from the unraveled sweaters with a help of a group of immigrant women in NYC, and as a sample to be sent to the women's cooperatives in South America.



How American? Anonymous/Self/Portrait

Photograph: Alina Zakaite 2006

Weekly painting sessions with the professional portrait artist, Brandon Soloff, in his studio, were “performed” during a period of eight months.



Video stills (Potato Flower Flag Dance) Isla Amantani / Lake Titicaca Puno Region Peru
Video documentation of the festival / potato communal meal: Yoko Inoue 2010

During the research process and traveling the Andes, I learned that the symbolic colors of red, white and blue, used in a flag dance of indigenous communities on Isla Amantani in Lake Titicaca, signify the colors of potato flowers which represent for them the “source of life.” In the Andean Highland I have learned that the expressiveness of the culture there is strongly linked to a distinctive agro-ecological environment and bio-diversity.



Potato cultivation and its agricultural sustainability shaped ceremonial forms, rituals, artifacts such as Pre-Columbian representational earthenware vessels and design motifs in textiles. Some Peruvian anthropologists see the Inca Road as a “living road” and a continuum of a cultural heritage. They investigate cosmology and agriculture, religion, social and political order, ideology and economic infrastructure within societies of the Quechua population.



Isla Amantani, Puno Region / Peru 2010 Photo documentation: Yoko Inoue

During my research travels to Puno region in Peru, I usually stay with a family of Toribio Juli Calsin on the remote Island of Amantani in Lake Titicaca.



Rice as Self

I distill idiosyncratic truths about Japanese identity from Japanese Manga comic books that acts as barometers of social mores and the shared consciousness of a particular time. Presenting a variety of related manga images for a lecture entitled “A Picture of a Bowl of Rice,” I placed commentaries affiliated with the subject of the lecture about food sovereignty and discussed Japanese collective identity or in a broader sense, cultural identity. A wall display of photo documentation of rice farmers protesting against Tokyo/Narita Airport construction in the 1960s to 70s portrays the Vietnam War era US-Japan geopolitics and armed struggle for agricultural land ownership.





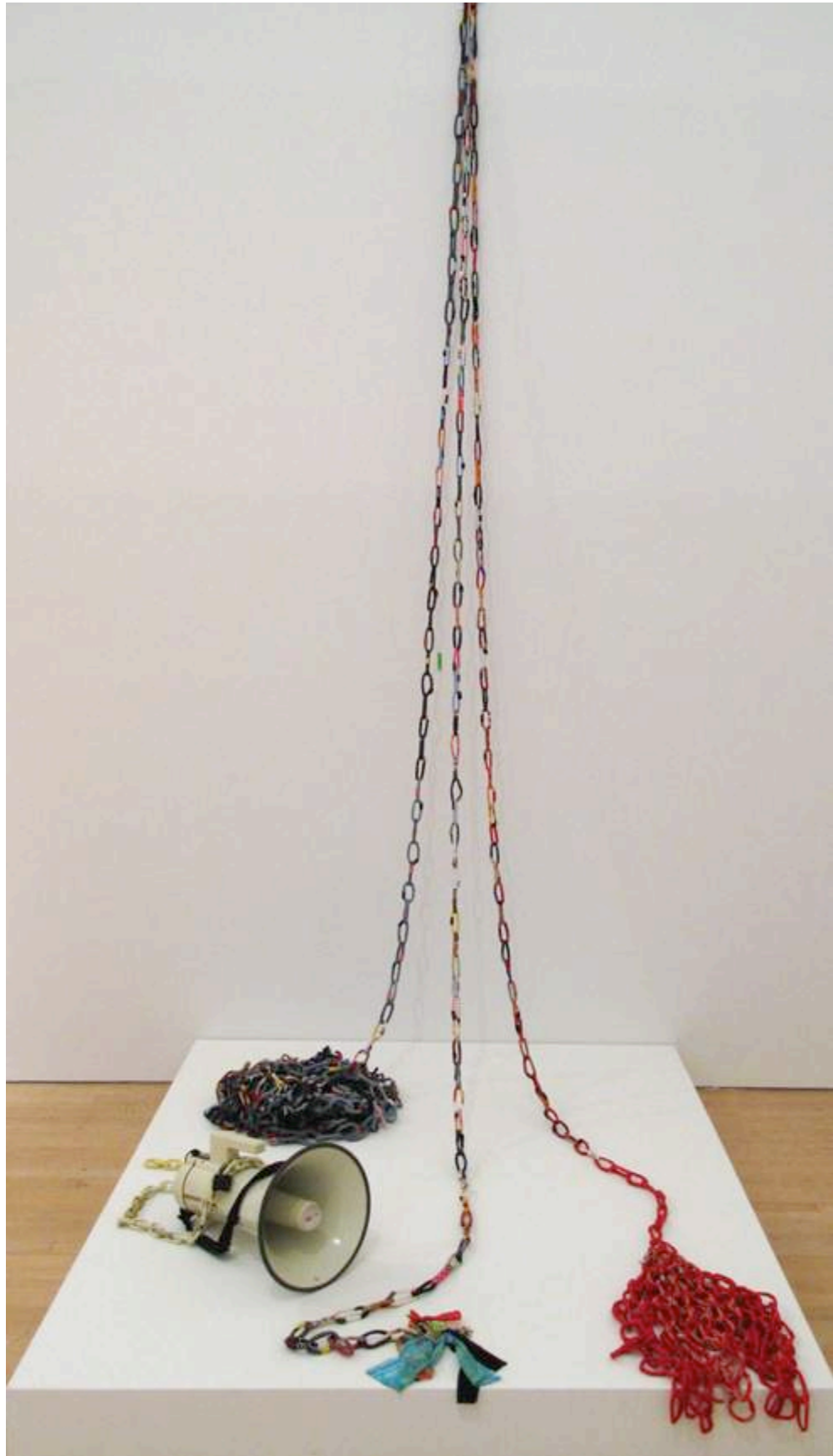
35mm slide projection, stills from the documentary films on Narita armed struggle by Shinsuke Ogawa



Nós (Portuguese title; dual meanings for **1. us** and **2. knots**) 2011 Brazil / 2014 Brooklyn Museum

On Itaparica Island, Bahia, in Quitanga square in the town of Itaparica I solicited scraps of cloth from local residents in order to sew them into a fabric chain. In exchange for the cloth, I gave out vouchers for ice cream from the store “How Nice.” I established a relationship with the owner to provide me with ice cream for a negotiated price and a table outside of his store to set up a sewing station. This project explores the different connotations of the word “corrente” (chain). Whereas the English definition is more limited (links, a sequence or fetters), I learned that the Portuguese word “corrente” has more diverse meanings. For example, current, flux, tide, tendency, common, public, known, torrent and water course can be found in translation. Is “corrente” something that unites or restricts people? A bond or solidarity? Or obligations? These questions were often raised during the performance.







Fruits Beyond Still Life 2013

This project investigates crop acclimation in historical and contemporary global trade, as a part of a larger research entitled *The Cultural Biology of Crops in the Globalized World* that I began in Paris, at the site of the 1907 Colonial Exposition, Jardin Tropical. The work proposes to reexamine the trajectory of tropical plants such as bananas, pineapples and coffee, from their place of origin to the market place in industrial nations through a broader lens and look at how colonialism and the idea of “exoticism” were used to establish a market for these corporate agricultural “products.” Fundamentally, it examines the economic factors, history, sociopolitical structure and the cultural implications related to the circulation of tropical fruits from the end of 16th century to the present.



The von Hess Fellowship, at Borowsky Center at the University of Arts in Philadelphia PA enabled me to make an edition of prints incorporating fruits stickers that I collected from venders at many different food markets in Paris. It shows a map of the colonial pavilions in the Jardin Tropicale with various key points in text associated with fruits production and trade, and is superimposed upon a photograph of my on-site performance.





Fruits Beyond Still Life Performance at Jardin Tropicale photo documentation: Rieko Tamura 2013

In July 2013 I met with M. Serge Volper, a scholar and research librarian at Bibliotheque Historique du Cirad, located at the Jardin Tropicale, to discuss future research possibilities. In his book, *Histoire des Plantes Coloniales*, he analyzes eight plants (cacao, coffee, palm oil, peanuts, cotton, rubber, bananas and vanilla) from various view points such as botanical acclimation experiments, slave trade and labor supply, the establishment of mega trading companies such as the United Fruit Company.



Water Gets No Enemy: A Wishing Well

Smack Mellon Gallery, Brooklyn New York

2012

Medium: ceramics (cast/modify/merge): Bone China porcelain, black porcelain, white celadon and Egyptian Blue glazes, handmade nylon and cotton ropes.

Title: Water Gets No Enemy: A Wishing Well

Through economic globalization everything is for sale, even natural resources, once considered a common heritage, sacred, and managed by local communities. My wish is to regain a spiritual understanding of water as an essence of life itself through object making. Typically my installations incorporate hand-cast ceramic components derived from mass-marketed merchandise. I am fascinated with the social constructs, cultural keynotes and communicative qualities that lie within the lineage of objects. Initially stimulating an “acquisitive instinct,” my work directs the viewer to see the surprising capacity for evoking empathy, compassion and personal attachment towards the banal commoditized objects. This work comments on the corporate privatization of water. I combined porcelain casts of various commercial water bottles and mass-produced Buddha statues from exotic-souvenir stores and discount shops. Objects were transformed to piggy banks suggesting offering and wishing. I wonder how human consciousness is given shape by images.



Mandala Flea Market Mutants:

Pop Protocol and the Seven Transformations of Good-luck National Defense Cats

Smack Mellon Gallery, Brooklyn New York 2012



Mandala Flea Market Mutants: Pop Protocol and the Seven Transformations of Good-luck National Defense Cats 2012

Medium: porcelain and stoneware ceramics, temporary shack structures with aluminum pipe and wood, hand-sewn fabric chain, vinyl banners, photographs, video projections, drawings on

ceramic and wooden plaque, chop-stick guns, kimono and other found objects. (7 shacks, 5 wall units, 4 freestanding sculptural work

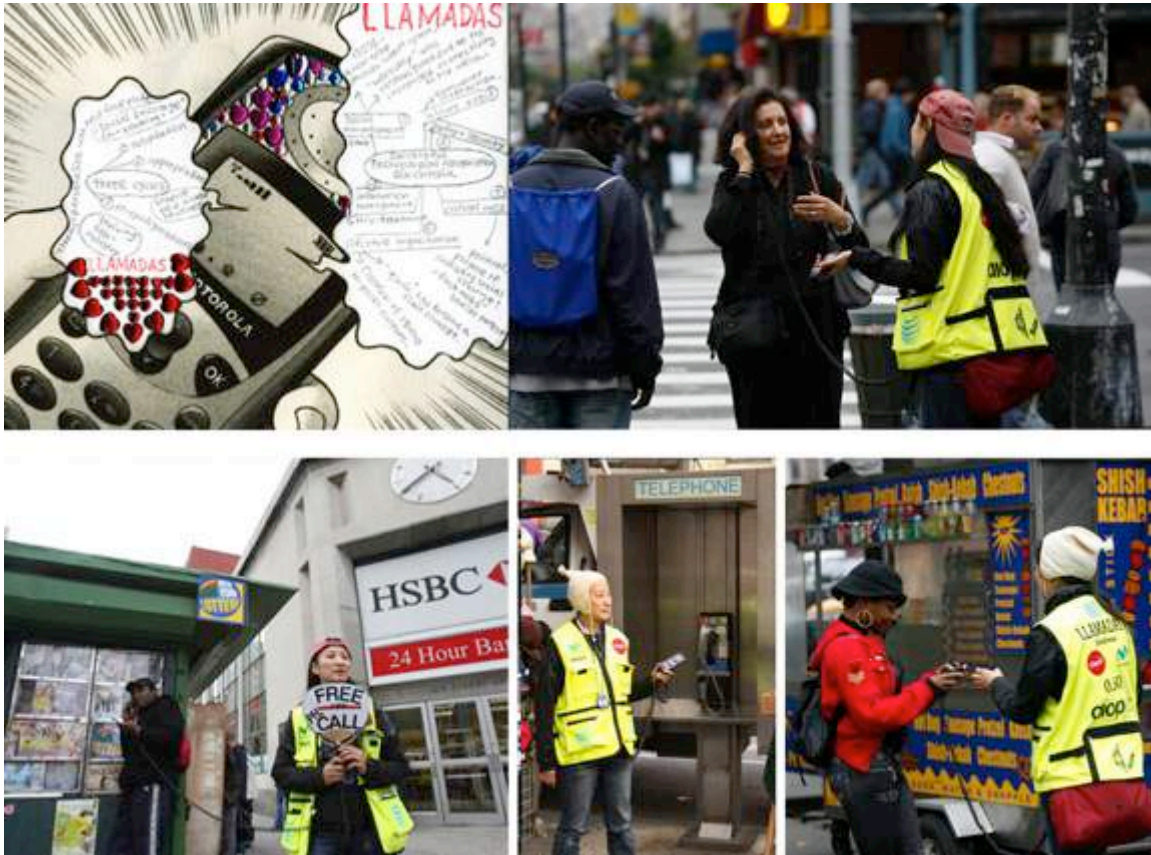
Title: Mandala Flea Market Mutants: Pop Protocol and the Seven Transformations of Good-luck National Defense Cats

Dimensions: approx. 4,000 sqf.

I transformed the gallery space into a maze consisting of vending booths. The idea was derived from traditional Buddhist temple fairs in Kyoto. I consider the confluence of different cultures in the marketplace, paying attention to such aspect as product routes, specific cultural derivations of products, and the influence of global neoliberalism on traditional crafts. Through public performance I place myself directly into commercial arena to carry out research that embraces sociological, economical and political factors. This process informs my installation as it affects the appearance and mechanics of the marketplace. I create a shrine of cultural curiosities that examines spiritual purity and commercial corruption. Materially consisting of excessive accumulations of banal commoditized sacred figures and good-luck icons and juxtaposed with video compilations of apocalyptic scenes related to Atomic Bombs from various Japanese animations, I examine how Japanese symbols and cultural iconography have made inroads into the American economy.



Mandala Flea Market Mutants: Pop Protocol and the Seven Transformations of Good-luck National Defense Cats (detail) 2012



llamadas telefonica (human telephone booth) 2009-10

Medium: cell phone, telephone coil cord, jewelry phone decorating stickers, vendor's vest, handmade signs, alcohol pads.

A public intervention performance project on 14th Street based on the practice of street vendors selling call time on prepaid mobile phones, commonly seen in Peruvian cities. I provided free telephone calls to those who had no phone or were in need of a public phone, temporarily replacing the dysfunctional public telecommunications system. Passersby can locate me as a “telephone service provider” by my typical brightly colored vest bearing the logo “LLAMADAS (calls)” Driven by my fascination with the complexity of the service/product values and tapestry of grey-market trade, this project explores its social factors of the phone users and political underpinnings of micro economy. It further investigates the meanings of ownership, ban, authority, advertisement, gesture and sharing. The bright yellow vest is commonly used by the “LLAMADAS” vendors in Peru that was sent to me from Lima’s black market and I modified the surface with silkscreen logos.

The Cultural Biology of Crops in the Globalized World

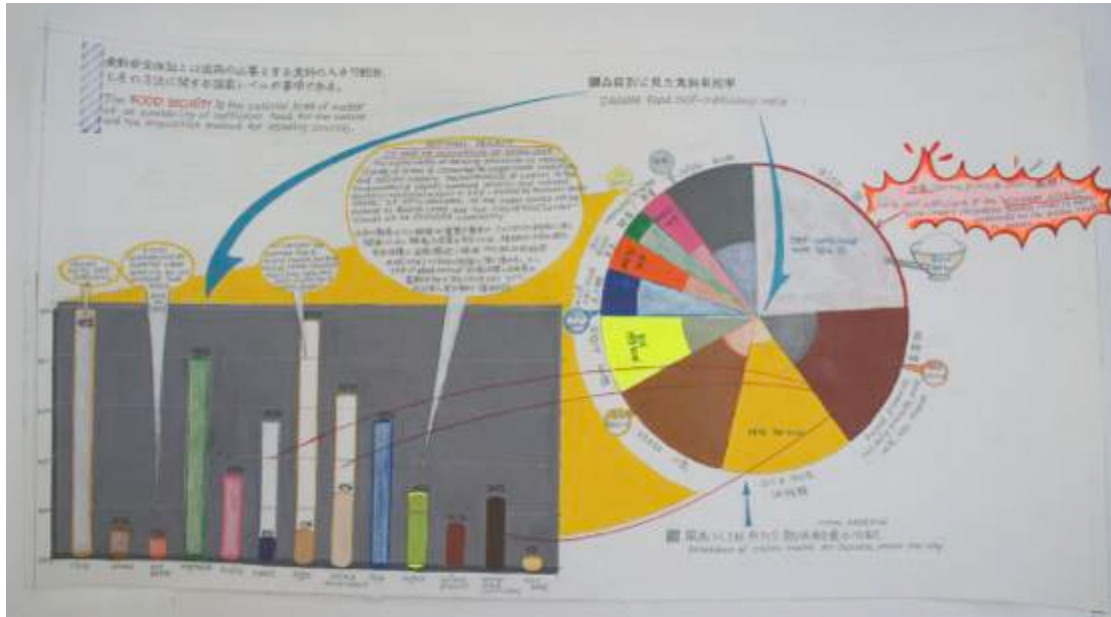


*Rice*Paper TPP Special Edition February 2015*

For the thematic residency for Food Justice at Santa Fe Art Institute, I proposed a research based inter-disciplinary installation and performance project, *The Cultural Biology of Crops in the Globalized World* (currently on-going). It investigates the effects of the global trade of crops on native cultural values and how the interrelationship of market fundamentalism and multinational corporations strategies potentially undermines democracy both in the United States and abroad (Japan).

CONTEXT

As a Japanese immigrant artist, my work exploring the notion of cultural heritage and national identity considers the theme of “food as identity.” My interest in this aspect came primarily from the heated political debate about the liberalization of the Japanese rice market between the U.S. and Japan, begun in the late 1980’s and heightened during the GATT Uruguay Round. The controversy provoked discussions about Japanese collective identity and the importance of rice in our culture; Japanese rice as a metaphor of self, rice and cultural attitude, rice cultivation on ancestral land (national territory and environment / agrarian landscape) and indigenous rituals (native religion Shinto animism). With the U.S. Trade Representatives (USTR) resumed pressure on the Japanese government in recent years to remove the tightly regulated high tariffs, quotas and government distribution systems that are affiliated with Japan’s politically sensitive rice import policy for the multilateral trade negotiation of TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership), I am motivated to continue developing a collaborative project addressing the impact that neoliberalism of the food trade has on environmental and social justice issues.



The Cultural Biology of Crops in the Globalized World incorporates drawings, small sculptures, presented research and archival material, summary diagrams, and performance documentations that attempt to reveal the “global food industrial complex” and connect key issues that lie behind our mass consumption of strategically produced and marketed / distributed food and crops. Using public presentations on some of the pressing issues of TPP as a starting point, I attempt to develop a multi-disciplinary installation that exposes impingement by any multilateral free trade agreement on food safety, human rights and national sovereignty.

Through my research, I have come to realize that TPP goes beyond my understanding of the notion of “trade.” It is a “secretive” multinational trade agreement and it includes chapters that threaten to extend restrictive intellectual property laws. I am concerned that these IP chapters in particular would have extensive negative ramifications on freedom of speech and privacy rights to the United States citizen as well. Similarly, some environmental and food justice organizations argue that other treaties like NAFTA, Korea-US FTA, TAFTA threaten the food sovereignty and self-sufficiency of certain nations and undermine their national resilience.

The diverse connectivity that exists at Santa Fe Art Institute and the surrounding environment in New Mexico offered me a complex arena where scientific research, food activism and artistic practice intersect. Further more, I continue relationship with some community members, seeking opportunities for collaborations with local organizations, cooperatives and small businesses for display locales and content contributions.



*Rice*Paper TPP Special Edition February 2015*

Imaginative charts and diagram drawings for the installation are aimed at revealing how multilateral trade policies comprise a new type of bio-colonialism that seeks to command many aspects of our lives by controlling seeds, crops, and entire food systems. Summary text and drawings concerning GMO and food safety, food labeling, farm workers' rights, and lesser known but important issues related to TPP, such as deregulation of life and health insurance policies, banking/investment laws, labor cost and laws etc., will be created for a hand drawn publicly displayed broad sheet (possibly publicly interactive).

Based on the Japanese handmade publishing format known as the "kabe-shimbun (or wall-newspapers)" that are especially popular in public schools, I elaborate on these "newsletters" by incorporating Japanese comic style illustrations.



*TPPeaceman no.1 Rice*Paper TPP Special Edition February 2015 Politi-Comics by Kione Kochi*

The comic strip narrative was conceived in collaboration with Kione Kochi (student at Bennington College). Illustration by Kione and now it is translated into English



In collaboration with Kione Kochi and the students of **La Tierra Montessori School** we made Onigiri* rice balls for a communal meal. This shared activity in the kitchen/classroom was a time to share stories and to consider symbolic values of food. If food can be understood as an important medium of exchange, as Japanese traditionally interpreted rice as “currency” and used as the barter systems to negate dependency of the cash economy, more rigorous dialogs will be prompted to fight against pre-established agro-industrial food systems and politicized distribution systems that are within a model of economic interests.



*Onigiri is a portable, hand made and hand held Japanese (soul)food, made with rice from the land, a flavorful surprise/morsel in the center, wrapped in Nori (dry seaweed) from the sea.



As Japanese women we consider rice to embody the expression of commensality. We believe that an important social role of staple food is its use as day-to-day grassroots discourse, whether at a family's dinner table or in the community gardens, that enhances our cultural principles, moral choices and social conscience. Popular Japanese proverbs, for example, "A grain of rice has a soul" (and therefore you need to finish a bowl of rice with no grain left), "A grain of rice is a crystallization of farmers' blood, tears, and sweats" (and therefore if you treat poorly, you will become a blind) acknowledge labor, respect the grower's land and probe cultural attitude and ethics associated with the social groups.

