

Ningen

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

Frederico Câmara

The University of Sydney / Sydney College of the Arts

Abstract

Ningen is a multi-channel video installation comprising the video portraits of more than 100 immigrants from Brazil who live in Japan, 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. This research paper aims to present the context, content, methodology and contribution of this research project realized in Japan and in Brazil in 2006/2007, showing aspects of academic research that are inherent in artistic practice.

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

Bio

Frederico Câmara earned his PhD in Fine Art in 2017 from the University of Sydney, Australia. His research interests include the human perceptions and representations of the environment, migration, photography and traveling as research methods, collecting and archiving in art practice, and the interdisciplinarity of Art with the Natural Sciences, Anthropology, Architecture, Sculpture and Design. His research output is in the form of photographic and video installations, artist's books, and text.

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 Portuguese and Japanese, 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. The Japanese community in Brazil has become a model of efficiency and endurance amid chaotic economic and working conditions, and the Brazilian community in Japan has become an example of adaptability in the midst of strict social rules that characterise Japan's society.

Context

Portugal colonised Brazil populating the country with Portuguese, African slaves, and immigrants from Europe and Japan, who mixed with the indigenous people to form a society with a very diverse profile. The image of the "mulato," a person of white and black backgrounds, is the impression that people of other nationalities have of the Brazilian citizen. However, Brazilians can look like they are of any nationality. If someone is born in the Brazilian territory, this person will be Brazilian, regardless of the parents' backgrounds (*jus soli*). In other countries, the parents' backgrounds have precedence to the place of birth (*jus sanguinis*). In Japan, a person is Japanese only if the parents are also Japanese. Of the immigrants who live in Japan today, the third largest minority is of Brazilians, the pure or mixed descendants of the Japanese economic immigrants who moved to Brazil since the beginning of the 20th century in search of a better life.

The Japanese migration to Brazil started in 1908 and lasted until the 1990s. It is the result of a Japanese/Brazilian policy to relieve Japan, then going through an economic crisis, of part of its poorer population, and to provide Brazil with the workforce necessary to replace the African slaves in the coffee plantations, after slavery was abolished in 1888.

The working conditions for the Japanese immigrants were bad and the promises of land and jobs made during the recruitment process in Japan were never realised. With cultural and language differences, their integration into Brazilian life was at the time considered impossible, taking a long time and a disciplined effort from the Japanese. Farm workers organised themselves into communities known as Japanese colonies and bought land, becoming farm owners. 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. Narrated in the book *Snow Falling on Cedars* (Guterson, 1994) and depicted in the film (Hicks, 1999), they had restrictions imposed on their movements, ownership of land, businesses, communications with Japan, and the use of the Japanese language. Today they are a model of a minority community in Brazil and the largest community of Japanese and their descendants living outside of Japan, at approximately 1.4 million people (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística [IBGE], 2008).

However, some descendants were caught up in Brazil's economic problems of the 1980s and 1990s and looked for better life conditions by migrating to Japan. This is often mistakenly referred to as a "return," despite the fact that they were born in Brazil and may have never been to Japan before. The Brazilian migration to Japan started in the 1980s when Brazil was going through an economic crisis while Japan was going through an economic boom and in need of cheap labour for its factories. It was believed then that those Brazilians with Japanese origins would integrate easier into Japanese society. The Embassy of Brazil in Tokyo (EBT) calculates that there are an estimated 320,000 Brazilian immigrants living in Japan, most of them the descendants of Japanese immigrants to Brazil (EBT, n.d.). However, in spite of their physical appearance and ancestry, many of them do not speak the Japanese language on arrival, and are considered foreigners by the local population. They are concentrated in the cities of Toyota and Hamamatsu, living in dormitories close to the electronics and car factories where they work long hours to earn salaries that are usually lower than the Japanese average. They are known as *dekasegi*, which means "worker away from home" in Japanese, implying that the immigrants' home is still in Brazil. Many of the Brazilians filmed in this project did not identify as *dekasegi* because they have settled in Japan per-

manently, spoke the Japanese language and considered themselves integrated to Japanese society.

I chose to work with immigrants in Japan and Brazil because of my own experiences as the descendant of an Italian immigrant, and 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. After graduating from art school 1993, jobs were scarce, and my financial situation was very difficult. In 1996 I decided to leave the country.

Content

My proposal for the IRCA was exploratory in nature. Its aim was to create an artwork based on the situation of the Brazilian immigrants in Japan. In Kyoto, I was introduced to a Brazilian person studying for a Ph.D. in Architecture, who invited me to go to Nagoya, where she said I would find a larger population of Brazilians living and working in that region. 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 walked, gestured, and spoke like Brazilians. I was surprised by my inability to recognise people of my own nationality, because in Japan they look like the locals, and partially troubled by my own bias, I decided to work with this population in my project.

My initial idea consisted of a video installation showing Brazilian immigrants speaking in both Portuguese and Japanese. It was only later that I became aware of the consequences caused by both migrating movements in their lives. As descendants of Japanese immigrants, they are considered Japanese by the rest of the Brazilian population. But because they were raised in a culturally mixed environment and grew up acquiring Brazilian cultural traits, they are considered Brazilian in Japan. This identity crisis became the focus of my project, questioning 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.

Methodology

a) Meeting and filming the participants in Japan

To start the project in Japan, I visited the NGO CBK (Brazilian Community of Kansai) in Kobe, located in the same building, where, 100 years before, Japanese people from all over the country would enlist themselves and their families, be sorted according to health, 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 and an exhibition of old photographs and documents, a film screening, a tour and talks.

In this festival I met Lissa Yamaguchi, the first person who volunteered to be filmed for this project. In the school that she owned and managed in Osaka, I set up my camera on a tripod, and asked her to tell me about her life before and after moving to Japan, first in Portuguese, then in Japanese. 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. It became clear to me that I would have to show what it was that she wanted to say in connection to her ancestors' migration to Brazil, and her own move to Japan. This project was going to be not only mine, 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 other person, and help with introductions. I initially tried to keep the gender and age groups balanced, but after some time I gave up this idea, 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.



Frederico Câmara, *Ningen*, video installation, 2006 (video stills of participants in Japan)

Figure 1. Frederico Câmara, 2006. Brazilian participants of the project *Ningen* in Japan.

Everyone who collaborated in this project responded to the same request:

“Please talk about your life before and after you moved to Japan, in Portuguese and in Japanese.”

“Please talk about your life before and after you moved to Brazil, in Japanese and in Portuguese.”

I wanted their stories to stay as original as possible, so I told them that they could talk for as long as they wanted, and that I would only listen; I did not want my views to interfere in the videos through editing, so they were also told that the videos would not be edited for the exhibition. Before filming they were shown a mock up of the exhibition and the basic concept of the artwork. All my negotiations with the persons filmed were informal and verbally agreed.

In the videos, they speak of difficulties in finding jobs in Brazil, but also of the difficulties in adapting to their new communities and workplaces in Japan. Some of them started as *dekasegi*, temporary labourers working in factories, but moved on to occupy better professional positions and a permanent status in Japanese society. Although most of their stories are personal, they also re-

flect the financial contexts of both nations and historical events, such as the 1995 Great Earthquake Disaster that destroyed large areas of Kobe.

b) Meeting and filming the participants in Brazil

In Brazil, the method to find participants for the project was similar to the one used in Japan. First, the director of the Japan Foundation introduced me to a few members of the Japanese community in São Paulo, who then introduced me to the next persons to be interviewed. In Brazil they were all *issei*, Japanese immigrants who were born in Japan, most of them elderly and retired.

Tieko Koshihara, who moved to Brazil with her family at the age of four, tells the story of her brother being killed by members of the *Shindo Renmei*, an underground organisation whose members denied Japan's surrender to the Allied forces in WWII, killing or injuring those who were better informed and outspoken about the surrender. Tieko was one of the last persons to be filmed for this project in Brazil. They speak of the difficulties of settling in Brazil, from the hard work and mistreatment they lived through as farm workers to having to settle in the jungle as farm owners. Their stories also narrate the historical events that affected their lives, especially the two world wars, with a few being survivors of the atomic bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But 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.

c) Technical considerations

The videos range from 5 minutes to 2 hours, and were filmed using a small miniDV camera, with a small microphone and tripod. To make the participants more relaxed in front of the camera, I would be the only person present during filming, which usually took place at their homes or workplaces.

d) Exhibition: video installation and research material

To achieve the effect of confusion that I had planned initially, I separated one sound channel to be heard through the TV speakers. Another sound channel was set to be heard via headphones, so each individual story could be listened to, if the viewer chose to do so. Figure 2. Separation of sound for video installation.

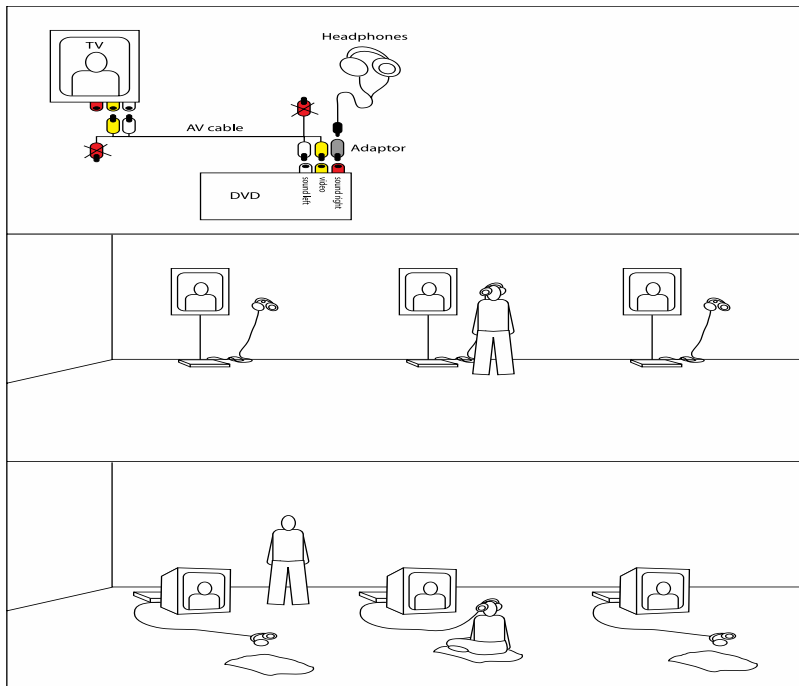


Figure 2. Frederico Câmara, 2006. Technical diagram used in the installation of *Ningen*.

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. 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 on previous research realised by anthropologists and social scientists that addressed the same themes as my project. 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 shows the process of application, triage, and training of Japanese immigrants in Kobe before departure to Brazil. The books were the equivalent of a literature review, a sign of the connection between my project and arts-based academic and interdisciplinary research.



Figure 3. Frederico Câmara, 2006. Video installation *Ningen* at the Galerie Aube, Kyoto University of Art and Design, 2006.



Figure 4. Frederico Câmara, 2006. Video installation *Ningen* at the Galerie Aube, Kyoto University of Art and Design, 2006.



Figure 5. Frederico Câmara, 2006. Video installation *Ningen* at the Galerie Aube, Kyoto University of Art and Design, 2006.

Contribution

Although the IRCA International Research Center for the Arts has the word “research” in its name, and was housed at the Kyoto University of Art and Design, the perception of the artists who were working in this institution, including myself, was that we were on an artist in residence programme, working on artistic projects. My project included aspects of academic research such as the possibility for discovery, a literature review and a methodology, that I only recognised in retrospect. One may perceive those aspects as specific to my personal artistic practice or this project, but in reality they are common to every artist’s practice, and that is evidence that artists are born to be researchers. The separation suggested on names such as “arts-based research,” “artistic research,” or “practice-based research,” may be confusing to those artists who are working to improve their latent, natural research skills to become fully functioning researchers. This confusion draws their attention away from where it is needed: how to find support for their research projects, their actual research, and how to have their research outcomes recognised as valid.

This project shows the importance of non-academic institutions such as the IRCA in offering opportunities for exploratory research in art.¹ 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. Universities may consider this model too vague and require that a research plan be completed from the start. This openness for the development of a research project before its execution is an important aspect about research in the arts that universities could learn from.

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. The participants in this project wanted to be heard. In Japan, personal copies of the videos were made and presented to each participant.

The crisis experienced by this group of Brazilian immigrants is only one example of the many afflicting people everywhere as a result of a worldwide trend of racial and cultural mixture that is happening through migration, a trend that creates pressure for a change in how we human beings define our territories and identities in a global society, urging us to seek a transformation in our status from citizens of a specific nation to citizens of the world.

The word *ningen* of the title means “human being” in Japanese, but sounds like the Portuguese word *ninguém*, which means “nobody.” This opposition embodies the identity crisis that those immigrants live in both countries. In Brazil, they are considered Japanese. In Japan they are seen as Brazilian. But *Ningen* is neither Brazilian or Japanese. *Ningen* is Brazilian AND Japanese AND European AND African AND black AND white AND female AND male AND human AND animal... *Ningen* is the person who goes beyond the evolutionary and normative social states of being, to be free of the tight and

1 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).

uncomfortable labels that are nationalities, races, and beliefs; moving towards a wider concept of identity, one which includes more than it excludes.

References

- Embassy of Brazil in Tokyo. (n.d.) *Ano do Intercâmbio Brasil-Japão*.
Retrieved from http://toquio.itamaraty.gov.br/pt-br/centenario_da_imigracao.xml
- Guterson, D. (1994). *Snow falling on cedars*. New York, USA: Harcourt Brace
- Hicks, Scott. (Director). (1999). *Snow falling on cedars* [Motion Picture]. Universal City, USA: Universal Pictures
- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística. (2008). *Resistência e Integração - 100 anos de imigração japonesa no Brasil*. São Paulo, Brazil: Author
- Linger, D. T. (2002). *No one home: Brazilian selves remade in Japan*. Stanford, USA: Stanford University Press
- Tsuda, T. (2003). *Strangers in the ethnic homeland: Japanese Brazilian return migration in transnational perspective*. New York, USA: Columbia University Press
- Weiner, M. (Ed.). (1996). *Japan's minorities: The illusion of homogeneity*. London, UK: Routledge
- Yamashita, K. T. (2001). *Circle K circles*. Minneapolis, MN, USA: Coffee House Press