

## Gaps and Synesthesia

A gentle voice quietly talking in English echoes through the door. Opening the door, there is an abstract, monochromatic video projection in the dark, quiet space and a beaker containing water and two stones are placed in front of the video projection. The video has Japanese subtitles. As I watch the video and listen to the story, I get a strange feeling. Somehow, the Japanese, which appears in front of my eyes, and the English, which comes into my ears, are telling different stories. When subtitles are added, they are usually in sync with the spoken words, which are being translated. However, the two languages here do not sync up with each other no matter how much I try. Being perplexed, I feel that my senses are getting sharpened.

As I listen to the voice and look at the video and the stones in front of my eyes, the shape of the work gradually starts to appear. Nagasaka went in the Shiretoko Peninsula in Hokkaido in March when it was still snowy and she headed for the Kamuy-Wakka Waterfalls. Kamuy-Wakka means “god water” in the Ainu language and the Ainu people feared the waterfalls, referring to them “evil water”. It has been said that there are no creatures that can exist in the hot and acidic conditions of the waterfalls. However, Nagasaka learned of the existence of a creature living there during her research process. What is contained in the beaker is a kind of algae, called Ideyu-Kogome, which was collected at the Kamuy-Wakka Waterfalls. In Kanji (Chinese characters), Ideyu-Kogome is written as “温泉小米” (hot spring small rice grain) and it is a kind of algae that lives in highly acidic hot springs, which are normally too harsh

an environment for living creatures. The English word “*Cyanidium caldarium*” is spoken now and then, and I can understand that this is the English name for Ideyu-Kogome from the context. I feel a strange humor on the nuance gap between the bombastic scientific Latin name and the cute sound of the Japanese name. At the same time, I cannot help but feel the human desire and karma of wanting to unravel the mysteries of the world and to search for roots, in the act of unilaterally giving names to these small lifeforms, which are quietly existing in the water. The rocks next to the beaker are fossilized sediment, which proves that algae were going about their lives about two billion years ago. These rocks illustrate both existence and absence: they are the evidence, proving that these kinds of algae definitely existed then, but they are not the algae themselves.

Formerly, the earth was a suitable environment to live for Ideyu-Kogome. However, inhabitable environments for them have sharply decreased on the present earth, thus, they quietly live in highly acidic hot springs, which are too harsh an environment to survive in for many creatures. On the other hand, countless natural disasters, such as annual record-breaking heavy rainfalls, have been occurring in recent years and we humans and many creatures on the earth are faced with a critical situation. However, these disasters might be events that will create suitable environments for other lifeforms. This work gives us, who tend to see things from the human-centered perspective, opportunities to imagine the time that has been flowing on the earth and the time of different creatures that are living there and to reconsider the multilayered relationship between humans and other lifeforms.

In this work, the story progresses in the first-person narrative format, where Nagasaka narrates her experience of having visited the

Kamuy-Wakka Waterfalls to an existence called “Angus”. The identity of Angus is not revealed and I can only understand to the extent that he/she is someone close to her, but this uncertainty does not obstruct my understanding and experience of the work’s structure. However, people who have continuously been following Nagasaka’s work would notice that Angus has repeatedly appeared in her works. For example, she presented a performance work in 2014, called *01\_Angus*, in which the artist herself told a story to the audience<sup>[1]</sup>. According to a review of the work, “*01\_Angus* is apparently one of the characters the artist created, who is living on this clay landscape. It is the Scottish photographer the artist encountered, one of the gods in the Irish mythology, a breed of cattle, the name of a Scottish county, and deep sea exploring equipment (Acoustically Navigated Geological Underwater Surveyor). That is to say, ‘Angus’ is a keystone, which gave inevitability to several coincidences the artists encountered as well as a symbol.”<sup>[2]</sup>. ‘Angus’ remains unspecified, keeping plural possibilities. The fact that she tells the story to the abstract being, who carries multiple characters within him/her, represents her attitude to entrust the receivers to interpret the story and I can see her intention to avoid any adamant, mythological story structure. There is no moral lesson that is common in oral stories, either. Rather, I feel the artist’s affirmative intention to trust the receivers of the story including the audiences, who are existing behind Angus.

In her methodology of creating a new story by connecting her personal experiences with histories and cultures of the land, I can see

the influence of her mentor, Simon Starling. Also, the actual feelings she acquired while living in Germany, for about five years from 2007, have likely influenced the work’s structure. She felt “there seemed a current that art had to be political”<sup>[3]</sup> in Germany back then and felt constrained by the situation. After thinking “Isn’t it okay to put more personal things and muddled feelings in artwork? Art reflects and connects with society in a broad sense but it doesn’t have to be reality, thus, I shall not make artwork which is one-to-one virtual image of reality.”<sup>[4]</sup>, she ended up searching for methods to create a state of multiple and synchronic existences, which do not get absorbed into any plausible logic or into one truth.

Following this line of thought, it is probably not unrelated to her experiences in the West that Nagasaka has intentionally shifted the timing to tell the story in order not to sync the English narration and Japanese subtitles. It is also important that one needs at least to understand both languages to grasp the gap between the English and Japanese, thus, the experience is not equally open to everyone. Instead of directly putting her political view and stance into work, Nagasaka, who has been doing her artistic activities in the West as an Asian, female, and sometimes as a minority, expresses the politics that are bare in languages and cultures in her extremely gentle, attentive, yet clear manner by presenting the “gap” between the languages. Isn’t it because she is someone, who has encountered different languages and cultures and experienced difficulties and possibilities caused by the encounters, she could come up with the questions and expression through these “gaps”? This kind of

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1 Nagasaka participated in the artist in residence program “Material and Mechanism” at Aomori Contemporary Art Centre, Aomori Public University [ACAC] in 2014, and, as part of the program, presented an installation *01\_Angus*, which included performances and other elements.

2 Yuki Kondo, *Aki Nagasaka - A story of scenery linked by unconscious responses*, “Material and Mechanism”, Aomori Contemporary Art Centre, 2015, p.53

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3 Aki Nagasaka Interview “AC2 No.16” Aomori Contemporary Art Centre, 2015, p.87

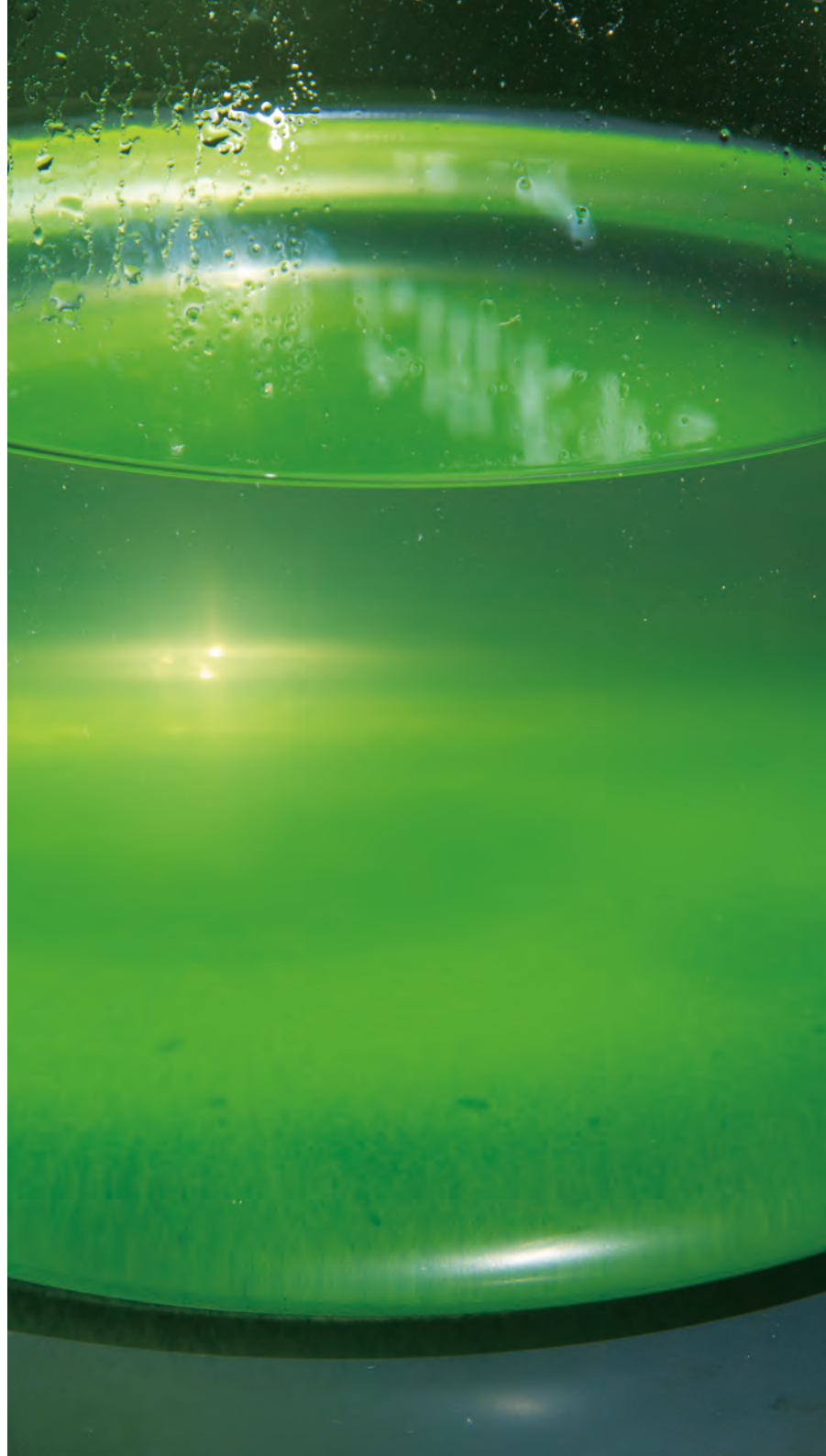
4 Same as above.

feeling might be relatively easy to understand for people, who are living in the regions that were once colonized, where they have multiple languages while English is their official language. On the other hand, her attitude of not completely affirming whether things are open and her act of creating gaps subtly suggest that not being able to communicate or translate easily bears possibilities to create deeper understandings and conversations, in international societies where English is used as the common language.

Moreover, it is a logical consequence that the person, who entered the land from outside, started with her personal encounters with the land and people living there and expressed the sense of there being a “gap” in a more abstract manner in Hokkaido, where blood-descendants of the Ainu indigenous people, who had their own culture and language, are still living now. The expression of gaps and fissures that Nagasaka attained from her experiences is an ambitious attempt to question the fundamental human desire of “wanting to share with others”.

Hiroyuki Hattori

\* This text is a revised version of the text originally written by the same author, the exhibition review Gaps and Synesthesia, published on the bijyutsutecho website on December 29, 2018.  
<https://bijyutsutecho.com/magazine/review/18955> (Viewed on March 15, 2020)



## Hiroyuki Hattori

Independent Curator

Born in 1978. Hiroyuki Hattori graduated from Waseda University with a Master's in Architecture. Through working as curator at Aomori Contemporary Art Centre [ACAC], he has been working as associate professor for the Graduate School of Transdisciplinary Arts at Akita University of Art since 2017. He has been developing various activities, including exhibitions, projects, and research, mainly in Asia. Recent projects he was involved in curating include: *Towada Oirase Art Festival–SURVIVE: Time Hoppers on the Earth* (Towada Art Center and Oirase Area, 2013), *Media/Art Kitchen* (Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Bangkok, and Aomori, 2013-2014), *Aichi Triennale 2016–Homo Faber: A Rainbow Caravan* (Aichi Arts Center and other locations, 2016), *ESCAPE from the SEA* (National Art Gallery, Malaysia and Art Printing Works [APW], 2017), and *Going Away Closer* (Centro de Arte Contemporáneo Wifredo Lam, 2018). He was also curator of *Cosmo-Eggs* in the Japan Pavilion at the 58th International Art Exhibition–La Biennale di Venezia in 2019.

## Junji Yamamoto

Earth Science, Education, and Museology

Born in Shiga Prefecture in 1973. Junji Yamamoto completed his graduate studies at Tokyo University with a Doctorate in Science in 2001. He promoted the "Four-dimensional Exploration of the Earth" project, aiming to dissect the earth spatiotemporally. In 2003, he became assistant professor at Graduate School of Science, Kyoto University. He promoted the "Galaxy in a Stone" project to search for the formative process of the solar system, where the universe and the earth come in contact. He devoted himself to search residual materials from the early stage of the earth's formation, which are buried deep within the earth. Upon experiencing the Aftermath of the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami, he keenly felt the importance of educational activities and aspired to education and museology. In 2012, he became associate professor at the Hokkaido University Museum. He started the "Sensory Tool for the Earth" project. Since then, he has been committing to improve scientific literacy through introducing the teaching aids he developed in science events and lectures and publishing their effects on educational and museological academic journals. Since 2015, aiming to create a place where society and academia intersect, he has been doing the "Intellectual-Hub" project to turn university museums into intellectual hubs. He is currently an associate professor at Hokkaido University and working with the goal to create an ultimate universal museum, where everyone can casually visit.

## Tsuyoshi Abe

Phycology

Born in Tokyo Prefecture in 1968 and moved to Saitama Prefecture during his childhood. Tsuyoshi Abe completed his graduate studies at Hokkaido University with a Doctorate in Science in 1998. Using the red algal genus *Laurencia* as his research specimen, he theorized their differentiation process in the seas near Japan by applying the conventional taxonomical methodologies as well as the cross experiment and chemotaxonomy by using cultivated strains. In 1998, he became an instructor at Graduate School of Science, Hokkaido University. He was involved in the foundation of the Hokkaido University Museum. In 1999, following the inauguration of the museum, he transferred his position to be instructor in the Section of Informatics and Media Studies. In 2000, he received the Best Paper Award of the Japanese Society of Phycology. In 2006, he joined the first algae survey of the coast of the Shiretoko Peninsula after almost forty years, and, since then, he has been participating in the shallow sea biological monitoring survey of the Shiretoko World Natural Heritage site, as the person in charge of seaweeds. In 2012, he took charge of making a summer exhibition *Algae Save the Future of Humankind* at the museum. In 2012, he became a lecturer in the Section of Fundamental Studies. In 2013, he took charge of loaning the exhibition *Algae for Humankind* to the National Science Museum, Thailand [NSM]. Since 2019, he has been an associate professor in the Section of Fundamental Studies at the Hokkaido University Museum.