

## Yukinori Yanagi

*Blum & Poe, Los Angeles 17 July – 14 August*

'Aspiring sincerely to an international peace based on justice and order, the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.' So begins Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution. And so begins, albeit in radically different form, this exhibition at Blum & Poe, where Yukinori Yanagi's assembly of oblong electrical signage *Article 9* (1994) spells out the titular provision in red neon. (The article's second and final part reads: 'In order to accomplish the aim of the preceding paragraph, land, sea, and air forces, as well as other war potential, will never be maintained. The right of belligerency of the state will not be recognized.') The glowing Japanese characters bathe the gallery's foyer in crimson reminiscent of the Rising Sun Flag. The same light reaches a nearby archival photograph of Emperor Hirohito and US General Douglas MacArthur standing side by side just after Japan's surrender in the Second World War, the latter man towering

over the former. On that image, the red light evokes a metaphorical sun setting on an empire.

Three versions of Article 9 overlay the photograph: one in the original English, ordered (allegedly) by MacArthur and implemented during the Allied Occupation of Japan after the war; one in Japanese, translated and modified from the American draft and used in Japan's Constitution (and by Yanagi); and one retranslated to English from the official Japanese edit. This Rosetta stone begs the question of what it means for one nation to constitute the agency of another, in peacetime and in battle, with a social contract established in a language foreign to the people whom it affects and implemented by the imprecise conversions of translation. How might those conditions create an unstable ideal upon which to rebuild a national identity? Configured like I-beams after an earthquake, Yanagi's *Article 9* shows the chaotic result of such a construction – such a construct – having faltered.

Structures in various states of distress, be it critical or physical, appear throughout the exhibition. In another room, a large photograph belonging to the multipart *Nagato 70-I, Nagato Blue – (propeller), Nagato Instruction* (2020) depicts a portion of the only Japanese battleship not destroyed during the war. The ship's surrounding environment is nonetheless the ocean floor, for it became a practice target during Operation Crossroads, the American nuclear tests that vaporised part of Bikini Atoll in 1946. Inverted under the Pacific, the vessel explicates the disorder hypothesised by *Article 9*, and in that explication, it redoubles Yanagi's critique of Japanese-US power dynamics during the latter twentieth century, casting the United States, the nuclear power, as aggressor *par excellence*. The work's other components – a 70:1 replica of the ship-as-toy, cast in iron, along with its constituent parts held in a frame mimicking hobby model sprue – illustrate the disconnect



*Article 9* (detail), 1994, neon, plastic box, print on transparency sheet and acrylic frame, installed dimensions variable. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, New York & Tokyo

between nostalgic military fantasies and the realities of war, thus scrutinising the pervasiveness of Japan's past imperialist ambitions to the level of material culture within, say, the family unit, where toys courier ideologies to impressionable generations.

Of war's realities, perhaps the most significant is the formation of national borders, atrocities notwithstanding, that come to be acknowledged, despite their irregular cartographic profiles, by colourful, straight-edged swatches: flags. Two hundred existing national flag designs, rendered in sand, feature in *The World Flag Ant Farm 2020* (2020), a massive wall grid of plastic boxes neighbouring *Nagato*. While ants march through plastic tubes that connect each box and excavate the sand-flags held therein, video monitors displaying closeup footage of ant behaviour punctuate the array, adding a didactic element to a clever work. The tunnels the ants produce undo the rectilinearity by which conventional flag designs abide, and through their labour they reincorporate the meandering line of the border, in concert with boundary-crossing migratory paths, which the channels also suggest, into our awareness of how

the globe is divided and to whom its parcels are fairly or unfairly distributed, shared or cared for.

Whereas collective passage in *World Flag* illustrates the permeability of notional and actual statehood, the movement of a single ant, tracked with a grease pencil by Yanagi, graphs the impermeability of state-sanctioned carcerality in three drawings together titled *Wandering Position – Alcatraz* (1997). That island penitentiary was Yanagi's studio for the trio, and he derived their scales from the surface dimensions of a cell. Rails, cut to the height and length of a cell's walls, delimited the field within which the artist tailed the ant and thereby inscribed its path on paper. As the tiny creature sought an exit, Yanagi's marks condensed along the edges, like scratches accumulated on a prison wall evidencing so many life sentences. Scratches made in boredom and fury, searching for a chalky imperfection, which might crumble and prove the citadel not so invincible. Scratches made by split fingers or, if resourceful, pieces of contraband bottles: artefacts from the outside.

Artefacts of, for example, America, whose continental profile, covered in bits of glass found

on Alcatraz, hovers opposite *Wandering Position*. With trademark coolness, Yanagi calls this one *Broken Glass on Map* (1996), and in its crazing, one sees a cracked ideal. That an artwork made in the mid-nineties, during the thick of the US culture wars, can seem as current an assessment of a nation – a *structure* – in various states of distress 25 years later, speaks to the prescience of an artist commanding profound social insight. It is because of Yanagi's cognisance, still active as made evident by its manifestation in recent projects, that this exhibition makes perfect sense in 2021, a year when so little else does. And it is as if, from his base in Onomichi, Japan, he operates a processing hub for fielding all the raw information about humanitarian crises and political turmoil that undergird and inform his work. Some might argue that the exhibition, with its take on social politics arising from postwar diplomacy, is dated, but that would be to ignore the patterns of history repeating itself – the rise in ultranationalism, the building global nuclear tension – and it would be to deny the fact that a quarter century passed is not so very long an interval.

Patrick J. Reed



*Broken Glass on Map* (detail), 1996, America Atlas map and broken glass on plywood, 276 × 366 × 9 cm. © the artist. Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, New York & Tokyo