Simon Leung met Warren Niesłuchowski 20 years ago. At the time, neither could have predicted the friendship and collaboration that would span three projects and much of the globe.

Leung took on a studio residency in 1992 at PS1 in Long Island City, where Niesłuchowski was serving as an assistant to the director. Niesłuchowski’s position owed to a mix of serendipity and savoir faire that has sustained him throughout his itinerant life. “I met [PS1 director] Alanna Heiss in Poland through a chance encounter on a train,” he relates in Leung’s 2011 video, Critique. “If I had been in a different compartment on that train, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Born Jerzy in a German camp for displaced persons, following the Second World War, and renamed George upon his immigration to the United States in the 1950s, Niesłuchowski finally assumed his “nom de paix” – as Leung calls it – during his seven years of desertion from the American Army. As an exile in Paris from 1968 to 75, Niesłuchowski was, in his words, “carried along by the historical flow”, getting caught in the eddies of May 68, Jerzy Grotowski’s Teatr Laboratorium and the Bread and Puppet Theater.

In Niesłuchowski, Leung found an ethical model for desertion that ran counter to patriotic sentiments – a model that held particular resonance just after the Gulf War. Leung’s contribution to a 1993 studio artists exhibition at PS1, Warren Piece (in the ’70s), interpolated that war with Vietnam, and PS1 in 1976 with the PS1 of the early 1990s. One of the project’s three videos, Under History Lessons 1993, finds Leung interviewing Vito Acconci about his contribution to Rooms, the New York space’s inaugural show. Even for an exhibition that famously gave artists free rein over the building, Acconci made memorable use of the boiler room, amplifying an audio track of such mock-pedagogical sendups as Lesson 1: Let’s Believe We’re in This Together (1976). In Leung’s writing on Rooms, this skewering of the pretence of community extends out, beyond the 1970s New York art scene, to a nation reeling from war. How Far Is Far from Vietnam? turns its title into a spoken mantra that recurs as Niesłuchowski leads Leung in a Grotowski exercise. The Polish theatre director’s plastiques, physical awareness exercises which train participants to lose their resistance: to get out of their own way. As Leung tries and fails to match Niesłuchowski’s headstand – itself an index of a life forged, the voiceover implies, at a distance from war – his body performs a residual lack to which George H.W. Bush, at the Gulf War’s end, applied the rhetorical salve, ‘By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.’

Some years after the collaboration, Niesłuchowski lost his apartment and left PS1, experiencing what Leung calls an “atavistic return”. His is now that precarious form of life that depends on the hospitality of others: the culturati spreading loose nets over the earth. “Cosmopolis is an ideal city, where the whole universe is offered without boundaries,” Niesłuchowski reflects in Leung’s project, War After War (2011). “Wherever you are, you’re a full-fledged citizen.” Warren has also named himself a refugee, guest and nomad, continually without “his proper place, his nomos”. Instead of fixing Niesłuchowski’s transient status, these terms – as with ones from Leung’s past works, like...
of Warren’s life is foregrounded.”

War After War shifts focus to Leung’s interpretation of Niesłuchowski and – at 90 minutes in length – allows for linear and cyclical viewing. The video is a document of Niesłuchowski’s late, peripatetic stage, made of footage Leung shot over a number of years in Shanghai, Warsaw, London and the United States. Niesłuchowski had, in Leung’s mind, gone literally “site-less”, and the nomadism that he habitually performs – and which Leung, as his shadow, obliges to copy – has a discomfiting similarity to the fair-and-biennial jet-set. That is to say, despite having no explicit function in the artworld, Niesłuchowski, too, is a beneficiary of its global reach.

“In some ways, because of how the artworld is set up, we make room for Warren,” Leung observes. “I’m interested in how he carved a life out of this particular apparatus, and it’s not cynical. It’s a huge amount of work.” Periodically, War After War gives the telltale signs of the cultural nomad’s daily practice – the passing of keys and instructions, the sofa made to accommodate work and rest. Niesłuchowski’s coat sleeve has been stitched with extraneous buttons, by Leung, to hide the inevitable, future wear-and-tear.

Niesłuchowski travels only so lightly. Laid up in a hospital bed, Leung’s bone-thin, beret-clad protagonist waxes philosophic about representation: “One is always in that *mise en abyme*, in that great abyss of constantly having to hold it together.” Moments later, he’s back on the phone, making plans for “Dan’s gala”. He cycles through locales like a migratory bird, yet the body continues on its linear course.

Recurring throughout the film are voiceover excerpts of Kant’s 1795 ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’, which argued for the right of all men to peaceful, temporary respite in the country of another. “They have it by virtue of their common possession of the surface of the earth,” Kant wrote, drafting a model of global citizenship that, at least by Derrida’s late writing on cosmopolitanism, was still far from complete. “Kant wrote a script for Warren’s life,” Leung reflects, as if his every encounter played out the ethics of hospitality. War After War makes its own ethical turn: the voices that give shape to the philosopher’s words, for example, belong to Warren’s hosts. Joan Jonas was among the readers who lent a chair for the project’s New York debut at CUE Art Foundation. Jonas sat through the film twice. “She said, ‘You’ve made Warren very happy,’” Leung recalls. “I didn’t know that. I worried about idealising Warren too much in my piece, so it was very important for me to give him a picture of himself, where he is dignified. Because on some level, I made the piece for Warren.”