

Simon Leung met Warren Niesluchowski 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 Niesluchowski was serving as an assistant to the director. Niesluchowski'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, Niesluchowski 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, Niesluchowski 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 Niesluchowski, 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 Niesluchowski 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 Niesluchowski'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, Niesluchowski 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," Niesluchowski 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 Niesluchowski's transient status, these terms – as with ones from Leung's past works, like

“BECAUSE OF HOW THE ARTWORLD IS SET UP, WE MAKE ROOM FOR WARREN. I'M INTERESTED IN HOW HE CARVED A LIFE OUT OF THIS PARTICULAR APPARATUS”



this page and right:
Artist in Residence, 2011, mixed media (from part one of group show 91 92 93, 2011, at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles); Warren Niesluchowski in residence at the Mackey Penthouse

facing page:
Simon Leung, film stills from *War After War*, 2011, single-channel video, 90 min





‘deserter’, ‘squatter’ and ‘veteran’ – are made to show their incapacity to ever fully define identities – particularly, Leung writes, “those that are less motivated by choice than are the effects of circumstance”.

There is one term, however, that Niesluchowski eschews. “He doesn’t quite know what his project is,” Leung observes, “and I, in a way, am the one who insists that he is an artist.” For *91 92 93*, a 2011 exhibition at the MAK Center, Los Angeles, Leung, Andrea Fraser and Lincoln Tobier were invited to revisit works from the eponymous years. Leung’s resulting project, *Artist in Residence*, loosely mirrored *Warren Piece*, making good on his insistence by hosting Niesluchowski, for six weeks, in the centre’s resident apartments. The necessity of accommodating Niesluchowski’s new lifestyle gave Leung’s installation its central work: a tabletop proportioned to the dimensions of the apartment’s bed and designed to mimic how Niesluchowski delegated its use. Over two-thirds of the surface laid a photograph of the printed matter and ephemera that had accumulated on the bed; the slim remaining white space was all that Niesluchowski left for himself.

Three monitors underneath the table responded, in turn, to *Warren Piece*’s videos, capturing a group discussion with Niesluchowski that reminds of the previously mentioned Acconci interview; a MAK Center open house; and, set to Leung’s reading of a Kafka aphorism, Niesluchowski circling the interior of a building constructed for Grotowski during his brief tenure, in the mid-1980s, at UC Irvine (*Aphorism 109*, 2011). “They’re not really meant to be watched,” Leung qualifies. “They’re sculptures, durational pieces – they’re made in such a way that the rhythm and logic

of Warren’s life is foregrounded.”

War After War shifts focus to Leung’s interpretation of Niesluchowski and – at 90 minutes in length – allows for linear and cyclical viewing. The video is a document of Niesluchowski’s late, peripatetic stage, made of footage Leung shot over a number of years in Shanghai, Warsaw, London and the United States. Niesluchowski 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, Niesluchowski, 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. Niesluchowski’s coat sleeve has been stitched with extraneous buttons, by Leung, to hide the inevitable, future wear-and-tear.

Niesluchowski 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.”

