

Interview with Ivan Manojlović and Radovan Cukić
conducted by Marianna Maruyama
Amsterdam–Belgrade
16 April 2014

Marianna Maruyama: When we spoke in Belgrade in March, I briefly introduced what I am working on with my colleague Manami Goda in Japan and was trying to find ways to understand how the Presidential Press Service archive can offer ways of understanding how any archive could be ‘worked’ artistically. Without losing sight of this particular archive and what it contains, I have been trying to develop a methodology for artists to approach such a massive and complex body of material. It seems to me that we must begin from two distinct points of inquiry – that of analysis and that of production – and work towards the middle. So from the analytical standpoint, the first questions we need to ask are: What is it? What is at our disposal? What is accessible? How is it accessed? Really basic questions. And from the side of production: Which relationships are formed? What else does it point to? Where does it lead? Is this methodology familiar to you in your curatorial practice? These are questions I’m thinking about as an artist but I wonder if you have similar questions or use a similar methodology as a curator.

Ivan Manojlović: This could be talked about from two different perspectives. One would be Radovan’s perspective since he is the curator in charge of the photo material. The other is from the perspective of the curator who is working in the museum but also involved with the theory of photography, which is my standpoint or viewpoint. Of course there is some practical information and there are standpoints that are concerned with the history of the archive itself. I mean, how it was constituted and how this archive was used, and the different phases of history it went through. And later on, its final phase which I believe is still going on, the ‘museological stage’ and now a complete openness towards the public. So maybe if you want us to start with the historical part of the archive, we can do that. Would you like that?

MM: Yes, it’s really interesting that you can so clearly identify these stages because I guess now you see that we are in this final stage of

making things public. That's a really interesting point to start from, especially for me, because the archive that I am working with, these family archives, are not at all public, nor do they belong to a museum of any type and I'm wondering how to deal with that.

IM: Maybe Radovan can say something about the historical stages.

Radovan Cukić: Ok, from 1948 to 1980 the archive was part of the office of President Tito. Later in the 80s it was part of the archive of the Memorial Center. Then in the 90s and the beginning of the 2000s it was not opened to public. It was in a building that was not accessible to the public, not even to the curators of the museum. At the beginning of the 2000s, in 2002 or 2003 the whole archive was moved to the Museum of Yugoslav History, and this institution was linked with the Memorial Center. And of course it is now part of the Museum of Yugoslav History. In 2011-12 we started our work on digitalization and opening it to the public. In November 2013 it was completely opened on our website. These are the stages of the life of the archive.

IM: May I add something? You can see that through this history... that this specific archive, if you look at it from one side, it is not so uncommon to have this kind of archive. I suppose in the world there are many presidential archives in existence, which is something that is the standard work within the office of the presidents.

But this archive has had its ups and downs and has specificity in how it turned out to be a museum archive.

Most of these archives which are presidential archives are basically more or less closed to the public regarding the year when some photos were taken. So, maybe after 50-60 years, if the pictures were considered to be 'safe' to be viewed by the public, they were printed or developed or presented in books. These kind of examples we have within the recent publication about two years ago by National Geographic and they actually published some of the photos made by photographers of American presidents. So now you have this book you can buy and you have some selected photos. So I would say that when you see it this way these kind of archives are open more or less but in a selected way. What we actually did now is to open the whole archive, and this is something we wanted to do so that we could present the whole archive to the public

so that anybody can view all the images that are in the archive right now.

I must say that during the history of the archive, the way that those photos were used is also connected closely to the region and the history of the former Yugoslavia. This history is also reflected in the material that this museum also hosts, guards or protects.

As Radovan was saying, during the 90s basically this archive was closed down or locked down and not accessible to anybody, and then was returned to us in the beginning of the 2000s. So you have this almost whole decade of the 90s which was also turbulent for the whole region in every political sense and social sense and you have these huge, massive war struggles... so this dissolution of the country itself so the archive was shut down also. So it's a way that you can shut down the history and a way that you can see the history. On another level, we were also thinking about this, and

somehow we both concluded that this archive is not devoted only to one person.

It's not only the presidential archive because you cannot separate the characteristics of the socialist regime in Yugoslavia from the personality of Tito. And you cannot detach it from the country itself because Tito was in a way a symbol of brotherhood and unity and the whole system. He was also a symbol and promoter of all these ideas so I suppose that you can also see this archive as a visual history of the second half of the 20th century. So in a way, looking through these archives you can find photos of places and see how they looked 50 or 60 years ago and you can see all the major political figures from that time and you can even see some customs from different countries and people, landscapes, and you can read the political relations between different countries or different political currents at that time. Ok, I can stop now so you can ask another question.

MM: It's interesting because it leads to the next question I want to ask. From what I understand, this degree of openness of the archive itself is

in a way a reflection of historical conditions and political situations and we can understand this to be a very direct relationship. So that's why I am interested in asking you why you are interested in having artists or people who are not working from historical or curatorial background come into this archive and work. Is it another way of creating this openness?

IM: The answer to this goes back to the curatorial practice of the curators working in this museum. The way they deal with this heritage, in house. The photos from this archive were mostly used as documentation or visual documentation visually supporting some themes from the exhibitions or just visual representation of what the curator wanted to say within the exhibition. But also we noticed that working here gave us only a limited view or limited position of how to see this heritage; especially because within this museum there are different kinds of people working here with different educational backgrounds. We have historians, art historians, and anthropologists, but all these people are [still] working in the museum so basically our point of view is limited. With previous experiences of working with artists we noticed that artists give us some other perspectives about the way this heritage can be looked at and which kind of relations can be read from this kind of material. And this was the starting point or ignition shots that we wanted to fire into the public to offer some other potential readings and interpretations of this kind of material. So this could also 'get back to us' and give us some other ideas not only regarding the photo material but also regarding other collections we have in the museum. So this was the starting point when we talked to Armin Linke and Fabian Bechtle about two years ago, and they also had an opportunity to visit the museum and see the archive and actually give their reaction. And they said, "Ok, this is something we have to do. We have to invite artists and invite other people". So this is basically why we are doing this.

MM: (laughing) So you got convinced that this was worthwhile.

IM: Yeah.

MM: But even though it [the exhibition] hasn't happened yet, I'm wondering if you have already come up with some other perspectives from artists in terms of how you deal with the archive itself. Are there any specific perspectives that you can already identify?

IM: You mean within this project?

MM: Yeah.

IM: Well actually we didn't hear [about the projects yet]. We heard only short descriptions about what artists are going to do. So, actually at this point to tell you exactly what the artists or authors will do...I know for some of them, maybe just a couple of them know. And it's interesting that the artists whom we know and know what they are planning to do for the public moment in specific ways are connecting their previous experience regarding this period or this subject or similar subject and connecting it with our archive. They are creating relations that we actually haven't seen quite yet or that we haven't investigated or researched yet. For example I know that Fabian Bechtle will do some artwork regarding the Museum of the Battle of Neretva and he is also connecting this museum with our archive because of course Tito was opening that museum, and we have some shots of that in the archive. He is also connecting this museum with a nearby mine.

RC: A stone mine.

IM: The marble from this mine was also used in the buildings of the United Nations and some other buildings in Yugoslavia and the rest of the world. So this kind of connection you can make and create new perspectives. But we'll see ... (laughs). For now, we don't know much about what the other artists will do.

MM: Well, it's interesting because you really place a lot of faith in the artists and a lot of trust.

IM: (laughing) Yeah. Well, let's say,
for us, this has become at some point a completely new way of working. This is an ongoing project, about two years, and we don't actually have any other opportunity but to place trust and faith ...

but I'm sure that in a way it will be a great opportunity to see all these artists whatever they do. But it's also important that a museum has its

own contribution for the exhibition. And we are also going to try to offer our perspective which was not so common until now. So

we are also trying to make something new.

MM: Yeah, it seems like even just by giving this chance and making this happen you are offering your perspective. Just the very act of opening it up, [your perspective] is already there. I am wondering if by opening your doors and opening up everything, of course to the public because it is online, but to us, who are working with it directly: Are there any limitations to the kind of freedom that you offer to those working with the archive? And if so, how would you set those limits?

RC: I don't think we have limits about the way you are using the photos. We are not placing any limits on you. You are free to use them.

IM: Sure, regarding the material – the contents of the photo archive, of course we do not have any limitations or we would not have put it online. Some limitations may occur but they are mostly of a technical nature. There are not a lot of us working in the museum. There are only ten curators here and they all have different collections [to curate] so only Radovan and I are working on this project. Our other colleague Mirjana is also working but she is pregnant right now. And she's not coming to the museum so these limitations are only of a technical nature. I hope that we will minimise these restrictions as much as we can and we can make a system between the organisers – Doreen and Mirjana and whoever is in charge of the organisational part for the sake of the artists. I would not say and I would not like it if, in the end, something happened because of the technical limitations and we couldn't find time to be there for every artist. So we are trying to make our work consistent to minimise this, and maybe to hire someone on the side to be a technical assistant. I hope we will overcome this.

MM: It's amazing that you have such a dedication to this. It seems like everyone involved has a strong dedication to this project.

IM: I'm sure! Even an emotional one. (laughs)

MM: Well, I have one more question and it's kind of a long one and it goes back to what I am doing. I've also found that I am getting seriously involved with this now from my heart, sincerely. Before I

briefly mentioned this project that I am working on. I am working with the photographs that were recovered from the debris after and then digitalized after the tsunami in Japan. Actually there have been exhibitions where people showed these photographs, especially the ones where the image was almost completely unreadable, where it has just become a water-stained texture. And there have also been books published where a selection of these photos have become public.

The recovery and re-archiving process all happened very quickly, urgently. It had to happen very quickly because the photos were deteriorating from the salt-water and hot days.

But for me, [this kind of exhibition display I mentioned before] makes the photo itself a fetish object, and really aestheticises the whole disaster and that is not at all what I am interested in. What I am interested in is more this process of re-archiving something that was personal (family collections and personal albums), and how they were lost and then how they had to be returned...how they were re-archived. How working with this and trying understand these very distant archives – the one in Belgrade now and these ones in Japan which are scattered. I'm also interested in this aspect of incompleteness which I think I mentioned before – that they are both incomplete in a way. There is always something missing. My question follows. I really wanted to be clear that what I am working on is not only about Japan and it not only about the disaster. And this is similar to the way that, I think, this photo archive is not really only about the former Yugoslavia in that it's not only about one thing, one geopolitical situation. It's broader. We talked about the Non-Aligned Movement in the same way, understanding that it is beyond itself. So how can I make it clear that it is not about one thing but instead something larger?

IM: Well I can start and maybe Radovan can add something. It's a complex question. Maybe I can explain what we are going to do and maybe it will offer you an answer or just a context. What we are doing right now with our contribution to the exhibition is that we have picked up some images of specific visits of Tito to foreign countries. We picked up the ones which were politically important for the former country and then we went back to the history of the archive and tried to find out for which purpose these images were made. If you look back in the archive to the people who made

the images, who were employed by the presidential office, [you'll find that] the department of the photographers was called 'The Department of Media and Propaganda'. So it's interesting because of the way these bosses of the photographers saw the role of the photographers themselves and why their work was important. So basically, what they did was to say, "Ok, we'll employ some photographers because we need these images because we need to control the images of Tito that reach the public". But on the other hand, the photographers employed there saw their role more as people who were producing an archive. So, they did not see themselves only as media photographers or people who provide media images. This is something that we explain through one archive document: this archive document was sent by the chief photographer after one year of his employment. He sent a sort of memo to his boss with a suggestions on how to improve the work of the photographers. And in this memo he actually emphasised the role of photographers as archive producers, of producing the archive images, of images for the future.

Somehow you can see that these photographers were actually talking to us now.

Through their work, through their images they were communicating with us now in this position. So in a way, it's archive work, but it's also media potential of the images. So the three of us who are now working on this, we developed a specific system so that you can look at any image within the archive through this coordinating system. On one axis you have the characteristics of the event, whether it's a mass event or whether it is more or less private ... but not truly private because none of these events are private. Of course Tito was aware that he was being photographed, so it's not really private. But on the other axis you have two different poles. You have the media pole and you have archive pole. So, you can place each image within this coordinating system regarding whether the image shows a mass event or not, and regarding whether the image was published in the media or could be published or stay only as an archive image. So in this system that we developed we actually deconstruct the whole archive through its basic element, which is the image. We developed four categories which are more or less theoretical categories. One would be the image of the mass spectacle. The other two would be this relation of the private body of the politician and the political body of the president, the way he as a politician or a head of state was acting or reenacting the roles that he took. And the fourth element would be something that we call political theater, like those kind

of events that have an advanced prescriptive way of happening, a protocol.

RC: Such as ceremonies, commemoration, awarding medals.

IM: So, if you look at the ceremony of awarding medals, the scenario is that Tito goes to another country and the head of state there wants to award Tito a medal, so the whole event is strictly prescript in the protocol sense. If you look at one of these events in the archive you have these basic groups of photos that report on each visit or similar event. By doing this we are creating a kind of typology so that you can then actually see other relations in the archive itself. So it creates another context for reading it. I don't know if this somehow answered your question but ... this is our way to look at the archive another way, on another level, not only as the documents of Tito's activities.

MM: Well, actually I think you answered my first question (laughs). Maybe it's a loop in some way. Because you have developed a very specific methodology for working with this archive in particular. And yes, it's true that [your response] applies to my last question too. I can use that in working with these other photographs [from Japan]. Just trying to make a system, you could also sketch this out as a diagram. Do you have something like this?

IM: Yes, we will have this in the exhibition, this diagram. We will also have something to explain our working method. And we also plan to exhibit some archive material regarding not only this memo that I told you about, but also regarding some other archive materials that are now in the archive of Yugoslavia, which is another institution. They're keeping the archive material regarding each specific visit that we choose. In this material you can find ... maybe on twenty pages, each moment planned in advance. You can then reconstruct at which moment, maybe even at which hour, specific photos were taken. So you can combine this paper archive with the photo archive and you can actually locate by time each photo that was taken. Of course this is tremendous work but we only want to show the method there – the way that it could be worked on.

MM: Yeah, it's great. And this memo too.

IM: Well, let's say, for the last question, maybe we can give you some more material but maybe ... sub-questions?

MM: No, you've been so generous. I have a lot to think about and I really like this idea about the memo because it shows you have communication across time and into the future. It's actually very poetic I think.

IM: Yeah, basically.

MM: Thank you so much. I hope to see you in Belgrade. I don't know if we are coming or not.

IM: I hope so. But anyway, maybe if you develop any further questions maybe we can talk again.

MM: Thank you very much.

RC: You might have some questions about the online archive ... how to search through the photos.

MM: Yes, I might. As I said, these family albums are also being digitized and I know that they are also making keyword searches. It's a different problem entirely because they are trying to find the owners.

IM: Ah, yes! I wanted to add something. Great that you reminded me because when we spoke in Belgrade when you came here, afterwards I was speaking with one of my colleagues in the museum and she told me that she was speaking with some of our colleagues who are dealing with the interpretation of the recent heritage and the recent events in Bosnia. I mean the 90s and the wars. She talked to one of the curators there and I believe that they were doing some sort of research in Bosnia for the people who had to move because of the war, the refugees. And speaking with them, they asked questions like, "What are you missing the most regarding your birthplace or the town where you lived?" And their answer was, "family photos" because there were people who didn't have time or the opportunity to take their family photos when they had to flee and they said they they are missing this – the family photos. Which reminded me of our conversation and your work that you did in Japan.

And of course there is another point, maybe we also talked about

this in Belgrade. There is another interesting characteristic of the archive itself. We have, of course, the negatives that were produced by the photographers, but we also have them in another medium because some of these negatives were developed as photos and these photos were developed for Tito. And they were placed in some fancy, super-looking boxes that actually look like books and these photo-book-boxes were placed in Tito's residence. The photos were developed for Tito and his wife. This kind of archive was of selected photos, which, even after having been selected still amounted to around 140,000 photos. Now we see that their function could be seen as a family archive, as a family album. Which is interesting because one of the photographers who was interviewed by Armin and Fabian, he said that these images were used by Tito's wife – let's say she was going to some dinner or an event then she would go through the photos to see what kind of dress she wore at the previous event so that she would not repeat herself with the dress. These boxes contain not only images of Tito but also images of nature and landscapes which is also a cool idea that Tito and his wife were using these images to say, "Oh, this is where we went two years ago..." It is kind of family album, I must say.

MM: They really sound like snapshots.

IM: Yeah, in a way they are. So maybe this can help you. It's another function or purpose of the archive – a big family album.

MM: (laughs) Yeah, like [an album belonging to] the whole country! Thank you. I'll keep thinking about this conversation and I'm sure I'll have some more questions but I won't pester you too much!

IM: Thanks. See you in Belgrade! I hope you can come.

One Archive Opens the Door to Another Marianna Maruyama

Because I had never worked with archives in my artistic practice, I began this research with the excitement and curiosity that come along with doing something for the first time. Many months later, after taking up the invitation from the Museum of Yugoslav History and Travelling Communiqué to work with the Presidential Press Service Archive of Tito, it struck me that, in fact, I was not a beginner in this field. At once, this project opened up the door to another archive, one I had touched three years ago in the aftermath of the 11 March 2011 tsunami and nuclear disaster in Japan. These interviews are an attempt to bridge two distinct and distant archiving practices and methodologies with the hope of giving the sense of how one archive opened to shed light on another. My ongoing interest in the working methods of the Memory Salvage Project in Japan and the way it has been taking form over the past three years is also perhaps a way of holding on to the thread that keeps me connected to my life in Japan.

Interview with Yuichi Shindo
conducted by Manami Goda and Marianna Maruyama
in Japanese with translation by Manami Goda
Amsterdam–Tokyo
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Manami Goda and Marianna Maruyama interviewed Yuichi Shindo, one of the main organisers of the Omoide Salvage Project in Japan. Goda and Shindo met in person for the interview in Tokyo, while Maruyama joined the conversation from Amsterdam. The questions came from both interviewers. The organization referred to here was originally called JSIS.BJK, short for Japan Social Information Society, or 日本社会情報学会 but the name has been changed to 思い出サルベージ Omoide (Memory) Salvage. Their primary goal was to clean, reshoot, digitally archive and return personal photographs and family albums to their owners. The photos and albums were recovered from the debris by the Japanese Self-Defence Force soon after the tsunami devastated the Yamamoto-cho area. Maruyama and Goda were briefly involved with the project and traveled to and worked in the region in June of 2011.

Marianna Maruyama and Manami Goda: We are working with the idea of archives and are interested in the many ways archives come into being. We always ask the basic questions: Who? Where? When? Why? How?... to make, save, and restore an archive. You are making great efforts to help save and return family archives – mostly photographs. How do you see your role in this process? What is your personal interest in this project?

Yuichi Shindo: Right after March 2011, I held two roles regarding this volunteer organization. One, as a leader of “re-shooting,” and two, as volunteer organiser to coordinate the volunteer applicants, and take care of accommodation. My career started as a photographer, having studied photography at university. As I am 39 right now, I saw the emergence of the internet in my early 20s and gradually shifted my focus to the internet. I own a website company now. Right after the 3/11 disaster, I wanted to offer my expertise as a photographer in an area where it was needed, but later I found out that what was really needed there was someone with skills to coordinate “resources” of volunteers.

One of the issues was that there were many people who went to the affected area, but there was very little structure in terms how to organize

volunteers there. There was an overwhelming number of people going to the area to work. So the local government was left almost helpless. I had experience with managing resources as I am a business owner myself, so I was becoming more and more involved in HR task. Now, three years have passed and the washing and reshooting have been completed. Our activity is centered on returning the pictures to their owners, so not many volunteers are needed anymore. I go to Yamamoto-cho every month to do the return work as the second chairman/PR of the volunteer organization.

It is not so much work now. The original idea came from Prof. Shibata. He tweeted “we are looking for someone with reshooting skills.” Reshooting is considered to be a very fundamental photographic technique, but it requires an actual skillset. It’s not a job for just anybody. So I replied since I do have the knowledge and skill. And one thing led to another... then I was in Yamamoto-cho. It was only after being in the area that I realized that more photographers would be needed. So I started calling for volunteers among photographers and sending them to the area.

After the event, my work really suffered and the turnover of the company dropped significantly. Almost six weeks-worth of jobs were cancelled. In other words, I got a lot of spare time. So I started to look for something I could do to help.

I didn't have money, so I decided to offer my skills.

And that was when I got the tweet from Prof. Shibata.

The main work of cleaning actual photos has been completed, so it does not require much work anymore. The main reason of my continued involvement is that it was a very shocking experience.

It took a few months for me to have come to this state, as I was busy with back stage work of resource allocations. It was around May when I came across a photo album of a little girl. She looked about four or five years old, and the collection of photos started from time she was in her mother’s womb. I was so moved by the photos and cried uncontrollably. I thought this was something that must be returned to the owner. I made it very clear to myself and made it a mission.

The reason I'm still doing this three years later is that this needs to be done. There are still people who want to recover their photos.

Currently, I am doing it at my own pace, financially and concerning my schedule. I travel once a month to Yamamoto-cho to do the photo-returning.

MM/MG: Archives are a hot topic in art and many artists are interested in finding ways to bring the archive out of the darkness and into a more public realm. This is always tricky because some things are private and were never meant to be shared or exposed to the public. I think this is a particular concern for you with this project. But we see it a little differently and recognise that there is no intention to expose people’s personal lives.

MM: Rather, I am interested in how we can find some other connections. To put this more clearly, I should say that I think that the archive housed in Museum of Yugoslav History in Belgrade is not just about the former Yugoslavia. Even though we are looking at thousands of photographs from a specific time and place, it is about something larger, something global. Even though the project Omoide Salvage has the aim to help individuals in Japan, I think the consequence of what you are doing could be appreciated by others, in other places. In this way, I don't see the project Omoide Salvage as only being about Japan or only for Japanese. I think there is a chance here to see it on a larger scale. What do you think about this?

YS: I feel neutral on this thought. Photography is a medium which has two distinctive characteristics: “art” and “document”. If we were talking about music, this issue would not come up. Music would be a form of art, not a documentation of an event. The same could be argued for painting. In this regard, photography is very unique. Of course, pictures or illustrations are used in advertisements, and they show very few aspects of art. I think photographs could function without art. No art at all. Both could be possible. Depending on how you see it – it could be art or just a piece of documentation. Both are possible. Our activities at Omoide Salvage have looked at the photos without framing them as art, but as we have been trying out different means, and they have kind of taken the shape of art with our Lost and Found activities. I think it could be interpreted in a lot of different ways. The most important principle we have kept for ourselves is that our core activity is to return the photos to the owners. Any other activities should be considered as secondary. Our Lost and Found project is just a by-product, not the main focus.

(Note: Lost and Found is the name of a traveling exhibition that began at

the start of 2012 showing some of the photos that were deemed irreparable, unidentifiable and thereby unreturnable. In 2014 the organizers also published a book with the same name. Book sales and exhibition loans both generate money which is donated to the community.)

Our Omoide Salvage activities have been criticized, from both art and documentation aspects alike.

1) Criticism as a document; a privacy issue. We have been constantly criticized as violating others' privacy. Exhibiting without the owners' agreement, would it be really a good thing to do? From a legal standpoint, we are not held responsible for what we do, because the act is seen as something that had to be done in order to return photos to the rightful owners. At the same time, although we are exempted in the legal aspect, I understand the criticism. I wouldn't feel very good if my personal photos had been displayed without my knowledge. Having said that, if the photos would never have come back otherwise, that would be even worse. So when I think about the "plus" or "minus" results of our activity, I see that the "plus" is far greater even though the personal photos are being displayed in public. So our activity is something that has to be done. It has been proven right in our past three years. We believe there are more positive feelings that come from getting back photos than negative ones that come from having the photos displayed in public. Actually this criticism comes from the disaster victims as well.

We try to be considerate and when we encounter really embarrassing photos we hide them.

Like "nudity" photos – in the past parents were taking pictures of their children without anything on. We deal with photos of people in bathing suits carefully as well.

2) Criticism when the photos considered in an artistic frame; a well-known photo critic has openly commented on our activity. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/K%C5%8Dtar%C5%8D_Iizawa

What he wrote in his article was that those disaster photos should have been left untouched. I think this is too much of an art-ego opinion. He claims that those photos should have been left to their "destiny" to take such paths. In his opinion, it would have been the "natural way" to let the photos get swept away. If that would be the case, then if a child becomes ill, he or she should be left alone, untreated, and eventually

die. In no way can I agree with this opinion. They are totally different things – "a contemporary art display has been swept away and left as is" and "a family photo collection has been swept away". I don't even have to respond to such nonsense.

MM/MG: Among the volunteers, have you noticed any particular types of people? For example, maybe you find that a lot of people have a strong interest in photography. Again, we are curious about your interest in this work because it is obviously such a big job on top of your full-time job.

YC: I am not sure, to be honest. This is one of questions we get a lot. I feel there is nothing special to it. It just has to be someone with time. Though that is just a basic condition. Also perhaps the people who are helping aren't struggling too much financially. After this disaster everyone in Japan wanted to lend a hand. So another reason people might have chosen this work was because they were looking for a relatively "lighter" job. There may also be something related to radiation issues. Some people preferred jobs outside Fukushima.

MM/MG: This is a sensitive question, but my colleagues are also wondering about this : do you think that this restoration process is risky in terms of exposure to radiation while working with these materials and working in the coastal areas where the tsunami hit?

YS: I never really thought about the radiation risks myself but of course there are some people who are really sensitive about it.

Yamamoto-cho is located in within the 50km zone of Fukushima Daiichi, so we didn't receive any volunteer organizations from overseas. We had some individual participants but not any group.

I thought it was something to do with this job, but later found out that there were such international volunteers in other photo-washing sites. I suppose people outside of Japan had more information about what was going on regarding to the nuclear accident, so international organizations chose places accordingly.

Yamamoto-cho is right on the edge of the 50km zone. But some people drew line there.

For some organisations the line was 80km, a half mile. But 50km isn't a very descriptive distance regarding the radiation measurements. It has just the same amount of radiation as Tokyo. If Yamamoto-cho weren't within the 50km zone, probably there would be some volunteer groups. There are many foreign volunteers washing photos. Some say the photos themselves might be radioactive. In collective numbers, they might emit some radiation. I heard someone took the measurement in Minami Soma area. It actually showed a small amount of radiation. It is a very small amount.

As long as it is not consumed, it is okay. No one eats photos, so basically it is safe.

The measurement was about 700 Bq.

MM/MG: For you, what is the power of an image? Would this be a different kind of project for you if, for example, you were trying to recover and return other kinds of personal items like small sculptures, or hanko (personal seals)? Jewelry? Objects, not images.

YS: We are salvaging other items as well, such as Ihai (spirit tablets) and Randoserus (leather backpacks carried by schoolchildren). The keyword is that they [the things they are recovering] are probably things money cannot buy. Even Ihai are in a way just symbols and you can buy them. I got this kind of response; everyone thinks they can remember the faces of family, friends, lovers, whomever they knew. But without photos, the memory starts to fade away as time passes. They say this is the most excruciating feeling. This tells us that we use photos almost as our memory indexes.

Our generation is 'photo-native' – we grew up with them.

We only realize the importance and significance of things when we lose them.

This might not so PC to say but it was as if a pilot project on the photo memory had been carried out in the Tohoku region.

In my personal opinion, I never really liked family photos. But now I realize how much meaning it has to keep photos like this. They have to be printed out. As the photo exist as a 'thing', someone could help. It cannot be just an SD card or cloud-stored photos.

MG: When I went to Yamamoto-cho, I was told that so many people lost their lives and that now these photos are the only places their faces remain.

YS: Right. Not only the victims, but also the original Yamamoto-cho (town) itself lives only in those photos. Some 62% of the residential area has been swept away. In Tokyo, it is equivalent to the area to the east side of Kokyo, the Imperial Palace, is gone. In our everyday lives, we cannot even remember what was there prior to what is standing now. People forget things. Without anything to rely on to keep memory, things get easily forgotten. Once something is lost is it hard to come back to mind, and that saddens people.

It is still in the idea phase, but in the future we want to create something that leaves a memory and record of Yamamoto-cho by using the unclaimed photos.

MM/MG: Has anyone else approached you to make an exhibition about or with these photos?

YS: A lot of people called in the beginning. Less now. Mostly they want to help by collecting donations by displaying the photos.

MM/MG: Though there are many more questions, we would like to know if you would consider the idea of making a publication (a book) together with us in the coming year.

YS: Anything we can do to help, let us know. Any available material can be offered.