



# TOMOKO SAWADA

LET'S RETHINK  
THINGS

The special exhibition *Factory Direct: Pittsburgh* at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh was the reason for the production of the monumental work *Tomato Ketchup* by the Japanese artist Tomoko Sawada in 2012. Amongst other American cities, Pittsburgh is listed as a top location for great history and success. The headquarter of the food processing company H.J. Heinz or simply Heinz (renamed after merging with Kraft Foods to The Kraft Heinz Company) is one of these companies based in Pittsburgh producing the famous condiment bottles of ketchup and mustard. Both products are fix components in every average household around the world. In order to avoid language barriers, the company decided to produce the front text of these products mostly in English and habituated therefore consumer society to one standardized language.<sup>1</sup>

With sources on the World Wide Web like translation websites, Wikipedia or Google image search, the artist browsed for translations for Tomato Ketchup and Yellow Mustard. Tomoko Sawada, born in 1977 in Hyogo (Japan) and now based in New York, created a Facebook artist page to receive support from the greatest source: the increasing social media community.<sup>2</sup> In the end, for each of the two products, Tomoko Sawada had collected 56 different language translations that she used for her photographic project. Back in the studio, she adapted and added the text of its label onto the bottles in digital form. For the finalized work, the front images of the two bottles of Tomato Ketchup and Yellow Mustard were printed in different languages on 56 single pieces of paper.

One of the three editions of Tomoko Sawada's work is now presented in the entrance hall of the Nicola Erni Collection. In a grid composition the photographs of each of the two bottles have been carefully hung side by side so that the viewer has the opportunity to recognize the difference in language in the artist's conceptual work. Conceptual photography focuses on the content of works using symbols to visualize an idea or to question certain states and movements. Tomoko Sawada communicates her specific idea in a manner as if a large art historical spectrum were being presented to the audience. The imagery of the artist's work is strongly linked to the American Pop Art movement and its most prominent representative, Andy Warhol, which emerged during the 1950s and flourished in the '60s. Warhol was an artist very much interested in the rise of the new, modern culture and its productive output. *Campbell's Soup Cans* created in 1962 is one of the most famous works he produced and achieved international cult status. In contrast to the work of Tomoko Sawada, Warhol painted

32 identical soup cans, each on one small canvas and in English only. By contrast, Tomoko Sawada intentionally excluded the original English in her work. Keeping this intention and Warhol's artwork in mind, together with the fact that the Heinz company standardized the language for its products, the work *Tomato Ketchup* receives many levels of meanings and challenges the Pop Art movement and the way it is understood. It can be seen either as a counter reaction, an answer or addition to American Pop Art or simply as a new marketing strategy for the two products. Tomoko Sawada not only printed imaginary products on paper, she created them with the very notion of shifting the focus from Warhol's seriality to a larger symbolic content: the importance and retention of languages in our globalized world.

It is important to see this work of Tomoko Sawada in the light of her works, such as her staged self-portraits. Dressed up as different types of girl for the series *This Is Who I Am*, Tomoko Sawada wears the same blue turtleneck, but varies her make-up, hair style and accessoires. Within this series, the artist not only changed her outside appearance but also her internal identity and character by playing different persona. Similar to the work *Tomato Ketchup*, there is a certain consistency on a formal level altering a little part within the image, which has a great impact on the viewer's reception of the photograph. Tomoko Sawada challenges the nature of the medium: photographs are supposed to represent the truth. However the truth can be hidden either through technology or by working with the given appearance of a person or the state of objects to induce a different form of perception.

In the end, the artist questions the structure of society, the way of thinking in clusters or social classes, and the constant judgement of society which immediately classifies everything based on visual appearances. Through her didactic method, Tomoko Sawada constantly tracks the spirit of time and encourages the viewer to think beyond the construction of a box. Investigating another form of portrait as in her previous works, the photographic installation *Tomato Ketchup* in the Nicola Erni Collection addresses questionable decisions, building a bridge to art historical references which leads to critical discussions. Whether changing linguistic or human faces, Tomoko Sawada strives at forcing a different view of our world and society, constantly challenging herself and the audience—let's rethink things!

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. press release, Pace/MacGill Gallery, Ken Kitano: our faces – prayers, Tomoko Sawada: My Faces, February 6–April 25, 2015, New York.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



Tomato Ketchup, 2012  
Set of chromogenic prints





Yellow Mustard, 2012  
Set of chromogenic prints