

**NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (*I'm here project*): *I Hate Free Hugs***

**Period: Wed., September 13 to Mon., December 25, 2023**



**The artist Atsushi Watanabe considers social issues related to *hikikomori* (severe social withdrawal) and explores the potential of art as a means of intervention. In this exhibition, he boldly brings NACT' s public space to life.**

The National Art Center, Tokyo launched the NACT View series, a project utilizing the Center' s public area in 2022. Notable for its spectacular impact, the space was designed down to the smallest detail by the architect Kurokawa Kisho. Emerging and mid-career artists, designers, architects, and filmmakers will be invited to present a variety of contemporary works in the space, which resembles a public plaza where many visitors pass through or linger and enjoy leisure time.

Atsushi Watanabe (b. 1978) deals with issues related to *hikikomori* (a condition he has experienced personally) and strives to create collaborations with those who are currently suffering from the condition, while engaging directly with society as an activist. In this, the third edition of the NACT View series, he presents an installation and video works related to the *I Hate Free Hugs* project he began in 2021.

Note: In 2018, Watanabe launched the *I' m here project*, in which he made collaborative works with people who were suffering from *hikikomori* or feelings of isolation. For this work, created with a group of people who responded to Watanabe' s public call for participants, he used the name "Atsushi Watanabe (*I' m here project*)."

## ■Artist Profile

### Atsushi Watanabe



Photo: Keisuke Inoue

Born in 1978 in Kanagawa Prefecture, where he currently lives. Completed a post-graduate course at Tokyo University of the Arts.

While enrolled in university, Watanabe began creating project-style works that deal with various social phenomena and surrounding circumstances in a critical manner. In addition to exhibiting his works, he often appears in the media, published articles, and participates in symposiums. In recent years, his major exhibitions have included *How I feel is not your problem, period.* (group show, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo), Aichi Triennale 2022 (group show, Aichi Arts Center), Setouchi Triennale 2022 (group show, Kagawa), *The Day We Saw the Same Moon* (solo show, R16 Studio, Kanagawa, 2021), and 2020 *Asia Project: Looking for Another Family* (National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art Korea, Seoul).

<https://www.atsushi-watanabe.jp/>

## ■Exhibition Overview

### **NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (*I'm here project*): *I Hate Free Hugs***

Period: Wed., September 13 to Mon., December 25, 2023

Closed: Tuesdays

Hours: Same as those of NACT

Venue: Spaces within NACT

(The National Art Center, Tokyo 7-22-2 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tokyo 106-8558)

Admission: Free

Organized by The National Art Center, Tokyo

Exhibition curator: Yukako Yamada (The National Art Center, Tokyo)

English website: [https://www.nact.jp/english/exhibition\\_special/2023/nactview-03/](https://www.nact.jp/english/exhibition_special/2023/nactview-03/)

For inquiries, call: (+81) 47-316-2772 (Hello Dial)

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<https://forms.office.com/r/bWemH8ZdQm>

## ■Exhibition Highlights

### The Artist's Latest Installation and Video Work Create a Complex Exhibition That Makes the Most of the Center's Public Spaces

In this exhibition, Watanabe presents an installation and video work as part of the *I Hate Free Hugs* project he began in 2021. These pieces are being shown for the first time in NACT's public spaces.



Atsushi Watanabe, *FREE HUGS FOR ABSENTEES*, 2023  
Installation view: "NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (I'm here project) I Hate Free Hugs,"  
the National Art Center, Tokyo, 2023  
©Atsushi Watanabe ©I'm here project  
Photo: Keisuke Inoue



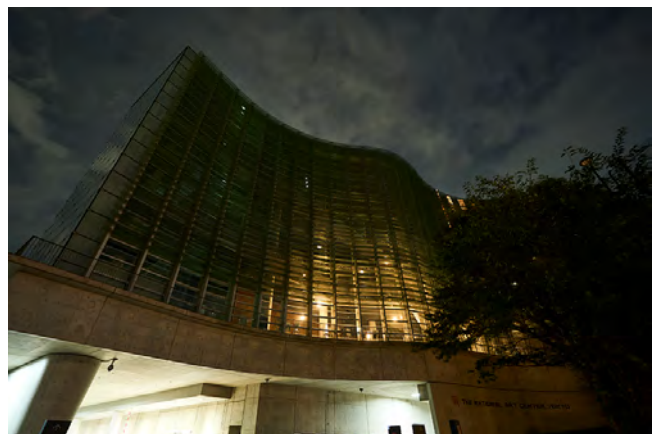
Atsushi Watanabe, *I Hate Free Hugs*, 2023  
Installation view: "NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (I'm here project) I Hate Free Hugs,"  
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Photo: Keisuke Inoue

### A Light Work Expressing the Existence of Those Who Are Not Here Will Also Be Shown Along with the New Pieces

Also on display will be a work made up of a spherical light, which can be operated by remote control by those who find it difficult to visit the museum, because they are currently dealing with *hikikomori*. This work creates an exhibition that remains unfinished in the display area while also transcending the physical constraints of the space.



Atsushi Watanabe, *The Lights for the Absentees*, 2023  
Installation view: "NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (I'm here project) I Hate Free Hugs,"  
the National Art Center, Tokyo, 2023  
Collection of the I'm here project  
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Photo: Keisuke Inoue



Installation view: "NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (I'm here project) I Hate Free Hugs,"  
the National Art Center, Tokyo, 2023  
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Photo: Keisuke Inoue



## ■Work Commentaries

### *I Hate Free Hugs*

2023

Backlight film, light boxes, wooden doors, wood, etc.

Watanabe was inspired to launch the *I Hate Free Hugs* project in 2021 due to problems such as isolation and loneliness that emerged with the return to physical intimacy that occurred following the convergence of the coronavirus pandemic. Free hugs had been popular in Shibuya and other areas since the late 2000s, when people began to stand on the street holding up signs that read, “Free Hugs,” and engaged in hugs with those who responded to the call. This symbolic act, in which complete strangers effortlessly hugged each other, gave Watanabe the idea to make contact with people suffering from *hikikomori* that he recruited on the internet. He then met them face-to-face, and gave them a hug to express a critical view of the tendency toward social inclusion in which we are only aware of those we can see in front of them. As a former *hikikomori* himself, who for a time lived without making eye contact with anyone else, Watanabe started this project based on his personal experience while also incorporating an action that was rooted in respect for others dealing with this condition. In this way, he conveyed a critical view of a society that focuses solely on what is visible and drew attention to the lives of those who exist somewhere beyond our imagination.

*I Hate Free Hugs* is an artwork that grew out of this ongoing project. It might best be described as an archive designed to record Watanabe’s activities with *hikikomori*. In this exhibition, Watanabe presents some anecdotes related to eight of his meetings with participants along with photographs of the artist hugging them enclosed in a light box, which are assembled behind a wooden door. Positioned in front of the special exhibition gallery on the Center’s first floor, these eight three-dimensional objects recall a monument. The structure, position, and appearance of the works are all connected to the question of how we imagine people who are in some faraway place.



Atsushi Watanabe, *I Hate Free Hugs*, 2023. Front  
Installation view: “NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (I’m here project) *I Hate Free Hugs*,” the National Art Center, Tokyo, 2023  
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Photo: Keisuke Inoue



Atsushi Watanabe, *I Hate Free Hugs*, 2023. Back  
Installation view: “NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (I’m here project) *I Hate Free Hugs*,” the National Art Center, Tokyo, 2023  
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Photo: Keisuke Inoue



Atsushi Watanabe, *I Hate Free Hugs*, 2023. Back  
Installation view: “NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (I’m here project) *I Hate Free Hugs*,” the National Art Center, Tokyo, 2023  
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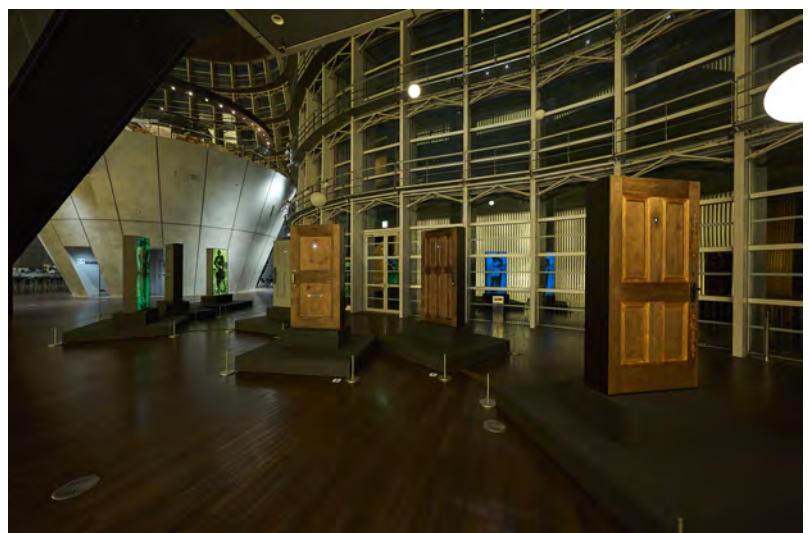
## ***The Lights for the Absentees***

2021/2023

LED light, lamp shade, smart plug, Wi-Fi, smartphone, monitoring camera  
Collection of the I' m here project

In a 2020 project called *The Day We Saw the Same Moon*, Watanabe asked people who were struggling with loneliness during the coronavirus pandemic to take pictures of the moon. Then assembled the photographs to create an artwork. *This work, The Lights for the Absentees*, was first shown as part of *The Day We Saw the Same Moon*, but for this exhibition, the artist has combined it with a new work, made of a spherical light, in response to post-corona social problems such as loneliness and isolation. The light switch in this version is controlled by a number of *hikikomori* who responded to Watanabe' s call for participants. The flashing lights are designed to make people who are able to visit the exhibition think of those who are unable to come.

Note: The people controlling the lights can watch what is happening with the spherical light by means of a monitor camera. The camera is installed in the glass-walled catwalk, but visitors' faces are not visible.



Atsushi Watanabe, *The Lights for the Absentees*, 2023  
Installation view: "NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (I'm here project) | Hate Free Hugs,"  
the National Art Center, Tokyo, 2023  
Collection of the I' m here project  
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Photo: Keisuke Inoue

## **FREE HUGS FOR ABSENTEES**

2023

Video projection, 60 min.

This long, uncut video, made with time-lapse photography, captures Watanabe standing in front of Shibuya Station for ten hours straight with a neon sign that reads, “FREE HUGS FOR ABSENTEES.” The video is projected at large scale on a 16-meter-tall, cone-shaped concrete structure, which exudes a strong presence in the first-floor atrium. This makes it look like an outdoor advertisement in an urban space as the artist calls to mind the existence of people who are absent from the space. Other video images are projected in the passageway that leads from Nogizaka Station to NACT.



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 Photo: Keisuke Inoue

## **I Hate Free Hugs (action on building rooftops)**

2023

Video projection, 60min.

A video work, projected around the stairway that connects Nogizaka Station to the Center, serves as an introduction to the exhibition. Shot over a continuous ten-hour period (the amount of time that the Center is normally open everyday), the video shows the artist holding a sign reading “I Hate Free Hugs” as he is blasted by a strong wind while standing on the roof of a building in Yokohama. The term “free hugs” refers to a campaign to foster friendship and peace by displaying a sign offering “free hugs” and hugging complete strangers who respond positively to the message. Watanabe, who struggled with a severe case of *hikikomori* for some three years, also displays a neon sign, intended in part as a criticism of the free-hug movement, which overlooks the city of Yokohama (where the artist lives) from the top of a building. Watanabe stresses that many acts of goodwill toward others (social inclusion, etc.) are either impossible or contradictory because they only apply to those who are visible to us or within the realm of our expectations. In this exhibition, Watanabe makes an appeal to unknown people who are all alone and invisible as well as those who are absent from this place.



Atsushi Watanabe, *I Hate Free Hugs (action on building rooftops)*, 2023  
 Installation view: “NACT View 03: Atsushi Watanabe (I’m here project) I Hate Free Hugs,”  
 the National Art Center, Tokyo, 2023  
 ©Atsushi Watanabe ©I’m here project  
 Photo: Keisuke Inoue



## ■What Is NACT View?

NACT View is a new series of small projects made by young to mid-career creators working in a variety of genres, such as fine art, design, architecture, and film, that are presented in the Center's public spaces. The name of the series is made up of the English acronym for the National Art Center, Tokyo, and the word "view," whose meanings include "gaze," "landscape," "viewpoint," and "way of thinking." The Center's public spaces are places that are accessed by a wide range of people, including not only visitors to the exhibitions, but also patrons of the facility's café, restaurant, and library as well as those who are merely pass through the building. By displaying works in these spaces, NACT View strives to give all of the facility's visitors an opportunity to become more familiar with contemporary expressions in a casual manner. Plans are also underway to hold related workshops and talk events.

## ■Press Images

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