

Tape 21: Aiko and Keri Interview – Full Transcript

A: = Aiko Suzuki

K: = Kerri Sakamoto

M: = Midi Onodera

K: ...I thought I'd start by asking you about the title of this work and what its significance is to you.

A: And you're talking about "Bombard Invade Radiate"... these seem to be three terms that are used very frequently in cancer issues, treatment as well as diagnoses. They seem to be the most powerful words that have a relationship to militaristic overtones.

K: And so you said you were very influenced by Susan Sontag's book *Illness As Metaphor*.

A: Yes, yes, she wrote about illness and the history of the use of metaphors for illnesses like TB and historically how they have sort of put certain illnesses into a very frightening, negative sphere and how cancer is the new sort of disease that appalls people and victimizes victims.

K: Right and so the using of these kind of metaphors keeps the disease sort of shrouded in mystery and myth.

A: Yes, and in a very negative way

K: Right, so... um... Maybe you could describe the work to me cause I'd like to hear how you'd describe the elements of the work.

A: Well, you know it's really interesting because I had thought of an exhibition when the simple act of discovering a lump can change your life dramatically. It means that your life is suddenly finite, it has a time frame. And I thought of my experiences with the disease and how it could be translated into art as a statement of terminal illness and all the ramifications that that has on individuals. And initially the works were more benign, they were more of a waiting kind of structure. . For example sculpture of books from waiting rooms that I was gathering from various cancer centers in Toronto and I was gonna stack them and create these huge sculptures and another was the ubiquitous bed that every single medical office has and how I was going to transform that into a sculpture with reports etc. So it was really more of a passive kind of installation but as the disease progressed and as I waited for being offered a show my thoughts changed completely in terms of my relationship to the disease and the experience so that by the time I was offered the show things were a bit different, they were more dramatic. And with the Sontag's book also I was really quite shocked that the use of militaristic terms every time I visited my oncologist, it was really quite shocking, so the show shifted into a bit more of an installation focused on words and metaphors.

K: So you actually used excerpts from your conversations in your sessions with your oncologist in the piece – maybe you could describe that.

A: Well I've had three what I call listening posts built, each one containing a small speaker. And my daughter and I have worked on grabbing sound bites from some of the interviews. Specifically when the oncologist used metaphors, he used a lot of metaphors, which I found wonderful; you know we were excited about hearing so many samples. So I have three columns with three speakers and they'll be played very low so that people have to go up to hear, it's like eavesdropping, listening in on extremely private conversations and these sound listening posts will give a context to the whole show.

K: And there's also the video projections, the three video projections. Maybe you could talk about each of those three images.

CUT

K: You were describing the three projected images...

A: Right which loosely we've just called "Semaphore," the Semaphore piece. This has gone through a massive change, much to, well maybe not the chagrin of the videographer Midi, who has made it possible. I don't think I would have arrived at the work had I not been working with someone like Midi because video is not my medium and I had a concept we did a shoot at Hanlin's Point in Toronto and after editing and starting to work on creating the piece and putting get together, because I have always worked spontaneously It's not until I saw images coming together was I able to say this doesn't work... or arriving at what I was really looking for... it's a terrible thing to be working with a filmmaker and not have a clear idea but to be feeling it out. It could be incredibly expensive, and I had the wonderful opportunity to collaborate with someone who was willing to just go with it and used a lot of her own personal time on this aspect of it. The approach was very forgiving for me so it took a while to finally arrive at imagery that seemed to be right. Presentation went through a lot of changes also. You have the video but how will you show it, you know, what is the best vehicle? And...

K: Can I also ask, first of all, how did you come to the language of the semaphore?

A: Well again, the words "bombard", "invade", "radiate", how do you present that in a gallery setting? How do you present how awful the words are? What it does in the whole treatment of the illness, the experience of the illness, they're warnings also of what you're getting into and, again, to connect it with the military, you know, --- using the body, using flags to warn, to announce, seemed to be a good way to do it.

K: So it's interesting because you're both sort of working with metaphor, at the same time trying to subvert that, or call attention to the sort of dangers of the metaphor... You know and I think that's really interesting about the whole work and it's also very hard to not use metaphor, especially in art. But anyway so in each of the images you are in progressive states of disrobing, unsheathing the body. Why... what was important about that for you?

A: You know, before I was diagnosed I had never seen a mastectomy, I had never seen a body that had surgery to eliminate to get rid of, to cut out, to amputate the disease and it was an absolute shock. It I suppose can be a shock, disgusting for people to be seeing a body that 's had such radical treatment and I thought that as the words were being signed it would be a natural thing to reveal the surgery and not in a frightening way. It's not in your face, its not overt, its subtle in fact you have to look really close to see it, but it gave me an incredible sense of joy to stand naked, to reveal the surgery and ... share it.

K: Well Susan Sontag speaks a lot about cancer as the invisible disease, as opposed to TB, but cancer being inside you and mysterious and so I think that's interesting what you're saying. Apart from also taboos about the body and especially the women's body and the breast in particular. So I think that with the images the background of the sea and the sky there's a sense of transcendence, do you feel that?

A: Yes, yes I do. And we were very fortunate, we were looking for some footage for one component and went back to see what we had shot and everything's in slow motion so movements become rife with emotional feedback from what you see and its very meditative and beautiful and a seagull and flown across and it just seemed to be the right symbol and again all of this was sort of happenstance and absolutely perfect for what we were doing with these images but I must say one thing, you know, originally I was going to use 10 or 12 TV monitors and I was going to have them mounted and each one playing a component of the shoot and I felt a bit uncomfortable about that kind of presentation but when you think of video that's what one think of other than one great big image. Again my subconscious was working one night and I woke up

one morning and realized that no TV monitors are not the way to go, that my art practice with fibers and fabric it...I need to think in terms of fabric as a vehicle and the question was how? And again Midi was absolutely brilliant in terms of how do you present 9 images without renting 9 video projectors which would cost a fortune and came up with the concept of three images on a long vertical scroll and it was the absolute perfect answer. It was perfect in terms of my own art practice plus the visual presentation, it looked just stunning. So I had three pieces of fabric with I will present sky, water and the third panel with have me signing with sky, water below and it's absolutely perfect.

K: It's interesting with the three images it's all very fluid with the 3 projections and even with the vertical projections on the one panel, it's very fluid. And also with the slight billowing of the banners, of the actual fabric. I think when I see it, you can see the image in reverse it's also very beautiful. So actually some of your comments make me think about process for you as an artist. You've said yourself that you have, most of your previous work was so much about working intuitively, tactility, and spontaneously, your references to jazz in your titles suggest that process. How did you...what made you feel like working in this installation, conceptual form was right for this subject matter?

A: I guess, y'know, because of the of the body... that it's all about the body. And it seemed to be the right medium to interpret what I wanted to present. So it's a big step, I know, it's a huge switch for me. It's been an incredible experience but one I feel very comfortable with now. Even though it was a long process and frightening in a way using a medium that was totally new to me. Again thanks to Midi, and ways that she was able to superimpose images, there are incredible abstractions. They just make me swoon some of the superimpose pf flags for example where the reds just bleed out it's like a painting, they're just beautiful, absolutely stunning. So these are sort of the other effects and yet the body remains central to the concept of the piece but the body seems to be surrounded with moving paintings which I love and they're minimal which also is also part of my art practice, you know, minimalism.

K: And there's the third element of the show with the war footage, like the battle footage encased in the metal sculpture. Could you talk a bit about that?

A: Again this is relative to the cancer treatments and how they have been developed again from militaristic, what would you say, well, for example mustard gas or poisonous gasses. And again science is a double-edged sword; it can be used for good or bad... And treatments have, Chemo therapy has... one is sort of just infuses with poisons, toxins in the body and that's a pretty violent treatment when you think about it but that's the only available today so I was relating it to bomb drops. I don't know... yeah I'm not getting this right.

K: Well it sounded okay...

A: Um Yeah so you know I gathered imagery from WW2, of planes flying in formation and dropping bombs and I just wanted a very loose reference to treatment and the military again. I to sort of, had an epiphany on a plane to Berlin and the idea just sort of struck me that this would be a very mesmerizing kind of example of combinations of the military again and cancer treatment.

K: And as you said science being used for good or evil, it's a really like the most striking embodiment of that opposition.

A: Right, Right... Midi, come in any time.

M: Well in the bomb piece you've used text - can you talk about that because in the other piece you don't use text and as far as your previous work goes it's text-less.

A: That's right, and I can be grateful to you because we were looking at the image and there seemed to be something missing because it was just likes, "so?" Okay planes flying in formation,

dropping bombs, bombs falling, explosion, and then it would repeat. And there seemed to be something missing and, again, because I was working with a filmmaker who is also a very good writer, she suggested we experiment with words and just wrote in one word or two words or whatever to just elucidate what it was saying, to give it more power. And she came up with the word "witness" because we are witnessing the whole process of science and medicine and killing and saving, you know the whole treatment process and it worked so there's the word witness that will come up every third cycle or whatever of the repeat. And it just adds context to the visual image, yeah, gives it a bit more meat, something to think about.

M: Well it's a kind of imperative to the viewer too.

A: Yes yes that's right.

M: As well as being descriptive, I mean, depending on how you read it, I mean, it's so boldly there. And this is something that harks back to another installation that I've seen of yours where there's water dripping onto the screen.

A: Yes I will have a plate of water above the monitor which will not be noticeable until a drip hits the surface and it doesn't do what I originally thought it would, which is to fuzz out the image, but it does make a splash and is a bit shocking because you're looking at a video image yet there is the reality of the real water and the drip hitting, the dripping can symbolize many things. It can symbolize chemotherapy, which is obvious, it can symbolize tear... what else?

K: Well to me, for me, it has something to do with the natural world and maybe that has associations to do with the other installation you did at the Gendai Gallery with the reflect... the pool, in a darkened space and that sound of that solitary drip and very meditative space and I see these, there are these, obviously references to the natural world with the projections of sky and the sea and then there's this rusted metal which is reminiscent of like a part of a plane that could've dropped a bomb. And the technology, even the listening posts, as intimate as they are, are a kind of there's a technological mediation you know and then there's this drip of water which is very unmediated and quite eloquent in it's own spare kind of way and so there's a kind of, and it's not even an opposition I guess, but there's a connection to all of that...

A: Yes that's true.

K: And also for me having read Metaphor as Illness the ecological dimensions around when you think about nature and the destruction and how Sontag talked about cancer as a reflection of the ills of the world... so um, it's sort of like when you see... outside you see raindrops falling onto a rusted can on the ground, that refuse of our society of our... and then that drop from the sky you know...

A: Right, right. Yeah, that's good... (Laughs)

K: Well, that's how I think of it...

A: Excellent.

K: But it is true, I didn't think of the chemotherapy of the... but that's absolutely true... but I think that's the strength of the piece that it has all those resonances and it does all come together in the body, that's what it is...

A: Yeah a starting point doesn't have to remain the only illustration, it expands out like that and what you've described is fabulous.

K: I was wondering too, Sontag's book, she wrote it in 1977 and it was published then and it seems to me that things have changed somewhat, but not as much as probably she would hope,

and I just wonder, when you think of now how many people, I mean there's almost zero degrees of separation for so many people, anyone almost that you talk to you've had cancer or someone you know has had cancer and yet it's still shrouded in this certain degree of myth and mystique but do you feel like there's been... I mean it's hard to say because you weren't experiencing this back in the late seventies but...

A: Well you know Sontag died a couple of months ago and they ran a series of interviews people had done with her over the years and she said when she had her first experience of cancer she would sit in the chemotherapy unit and would ask people around her "what kind of chemo are you getting?" and they would say, "y' know, chemo" having and she said you know because she had a recurrence that it was just an amazing, she would ask people what kind of chemo they were getting and they would know exactly what kind of drugs they were getting and so there was a kind of awareness, and I don't know if that's because of the internet or because cancer is becoming enshrouded, um it's not that "Big C" people don't talk about, I mean, there was a time when people wouldn't admit to a family member having cancer. It's like admitting to a family member who had a mental disorder, y'know, it was something that was full of shame and embarrassment. So in that respect I think people have come a long way, they've become more advocates for themselves and more knowledgeable but there is still a long way to go. I've noticed that just in my personal experiences people just don't know what to say, they're afraid, they feel awkward, they're, you know, very uncomfortable with the disease because it's fraught with horror.

K: (Laughs) I'm trying to think of what else to say... Midi do you have any questions

CUT

M: Oh yes, how about working with Chinook, your daughter, in terms of that?

A: I think it was very difficult for her, especially the listening posts because she had to listen to the interviews with my oncologist over and over again and I think she had eaten a hash brownie one night and was trying to work on it and burst into tears because she said she just couldn't stand listening to it anymore. That part was very difficult for her, but I have complete confidence in her aesthetics and she tends to be minimal, the way I am minimal, and there was a lot of back and forth, but I trusted her instincts. She was here for 4 weeks over the Christmas holiday and we were able to do quite a bit of work then and I'm quite happy with it. We'll find out when we get to the gallery how much sound we will in fact use besides the three listening posts.

K: That brings to mind, to me the question of the autobiographical because that's another function of working with... I mean we're sitting here surrounded some of your work and the abstract expressionist work and what about... what was it like to do work that was very explicitly autobiographical?

A: It was a big step into another direction and I had shown a grant application that I had written up for this project to someone and this person said that you probably won't get a grant because people might think you're being self-indulgent and to some extent that might be true, but because of the numbers that this disease is affecting I really felt that it was important... it really just seemed important for me to make a statement about it in the art world context because there was this big show for breast cancer that was at the ROM quite a few years ago and it engaged... I don't think the women had cancer themselves, but they were artists invited to make statements about breast cancer so, y'know, why not make a statement from oneself who actually has the experience and has gone through it? But it is a big step to put something autobiographical into a gallery setting and some people may think it is, as this person said, self-indulgent...

K: I should just amend that. I don't think it's explicitly autobiographical beyond the fact that you are... one could infer that you yourself have cancer and you are yourself represented there but actually the... the sort of jumping off point is actually philosophical, theoretical premise that's put

forward by Susan Sontag about shrouding cancer in metaphor and contributing to its mythicization, I guess.

A: Right and that's why I think this show is stronger than the first one would have been because the first one was very... was much more autobiographical so I think it's a good thing I wasn't given a show earlier because this is a much stronger statement because there is less of me, yes.

K: So I don't think this is self-indulgent at all...

A: Oh (laughs)... good.

K: And um... also I wondered about, and I guess in a way this goes back to the autobiographical, but not in any explicit way, but about Japanese influences in your work. And you mentioned about being... working very much in a minimalist tradition which of course has ties to... there are influences of Japanese art in there, inherent in that history and how do you see that in your work in general and in this piece I guess, the influence of the Japanese aesthetic.

A: That's really difficult y'know because I... I've had reviews where people might refer to my Japanese heritage but you know my argument has always been, well y'know, if the name wasn't "Suzuki" would you still use that reference because there has been a lot of Westerners whose work could be... if you didn't have the name you would say 'boy, that's really Japanese' um, so I don't know, I've always found that a difficult one. I'm not that tied to my heritage, the cultural heritage other than movies, movies and books, but art, I can't say that I've really researched Japanese art. I did a series a few of years ago that was based on master works by Japanese paintings but those pieces were not minimalist at all, they were very complex and it was an overt sort of grabbing off of certain imagery and then re-framing them, um, so that question I've always found a bit um... difficult. And I don't know if it's denial or, y'know, what but... maybe there's an aesthetic that comes through the genes in terms of how you approach work and using soft colours one would say is very Japanese you know, I don't like -- Ronald's pieces, I don't use bright cobalt blue with orange and yellow, y'know, my colours tend to be more muted. Or is that feminine? I don't know.

K: Right. Yeah it's very complicated and then yeah... it's... and the danger is to be seen in a kind of reductive way by an audience, by a Western audience so it's uh, yeah...

A: Cause I had a reviewer here who wrote an essay for... and it really shocked me because the description of me was about this Asian woman serving food and tea! And would this person have referred to a white artist in the same way? So this issue is fraught with... there's a lot of danger in... in identifying ethnicity with art, with art practices.

CUT

K: Well I guess there really isn't anymore to say about being Japanese and making art, being Japanese-Canadian, um... Back to the sound thing... apart from the listening post, the other sound element is linked directly to the projections – is that right? – as opposed to sort of an ambient gallery piece it's really very much meant to be with that work and why did you... what made you conceive it in that way?

A: Well, y'know we'll decide whether or not we're going to use the audio or not in the gallery. As you say, sometimes silent video is more powerful and... but I thought that if the videos are ever shown on their own without the other elements then it would be important to have a sound element. To me, having sound augmenting a video, I mean a visual, can be very potent.

CUT

A: Its very minimal and it's just to dramatize the central image of the figure and she just has. It's very, very subtle, it's very low and its not going to be intrusive at all it might just be a sound that strengthens what you see or draws you into it, put you into a state of reverie with it so it doesn't, it doesn't interfere at all with the visual. And it's just the sound of...she sort of slow motioned the sound of flags flapping and has added a few lines from one of her musical compositions that, y'know, very sustained, very sustained lines of music that come in and fade out. So it really brings you into the image and its pretty mesmerizing so we'll see. We'll see if we're going to use it or not.

K: Okay. Now the other component to the exhibition, not with the work itself, are a series of windows that lead into the gallery that you're going to put up some work in.

A: Right and thanks to you (we should call it curated by Kerri Sakamoto) as I emailed Keri and said 'Ah! They want me to fill four windows that are sort of outside the gallery that will sort of lead the way into the show and of course I wanted to use them and they suggested that I could use old works even, hang old works in it which would be ridiculous and um I remember emailing you saying, 'do you have any ideas?' Uh, thank god for women – wonderful collaborators - and you said why not use some quotes which was absolutely brilliant because there are a couple of sound bites from the Toronto Star that I found which were absolutely perfect to highlight, again, the use of language for cancer treatment. So the words are going to be affixed to the front of the glass of each piece so as one walks down the hall you read each of the quotes, which are pretty powerful. I may add little installations in each window, I'm not sure, I'm just conceptualizing them now. So that's going to be the little entry into the show itself. And Susan Sontag, one of her quotes will lead the way. So I have you to thank, Midi...

K: Susan Sontag.

A: Yes! (laughs)

K: So that's another interesting form to work with, it's a kind of like a... almost like a diorama to work in a glass case like that when you work in miniatures. But that's a whole other kind of medium to work with, a window....

A: And that was a brilliant concept, simple, because frankly I didn't want to spend any more money on creating something for it, so it's simple and I think it will be powerful.

K: Where did you get the, I'm just interested, in the battle sequence.

A: Queen Video. They have a whole section on WW2 documentaries so I just went through them and grabbed images.

K: Oh I see. Yeah, that was just an afterthought.

A: Anything else, Midi?

M: Not that I can think of... I mean we've got over 40 minutes here so...

A: Wow.

K: Oh wow, that time went by fast.

M: Is there anything else you want to add that you haven't talked about?

K: Um, where's my Susan Sontag book? Did it fall into here or something? Cause I'm wondering if Aiko might read a quote from it or something. Was there any part that you... cause I mean I sort of like this last part that you...

A: I'll need my glasses.

CUT

[Aiko reading from Sontag book. 0:45:12:07]

A: Okay this is a quote from Susan Sontag and her book "Illness As Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors":

"Our views about cancer, and the metaphors we have imposed on it, are so much a vehicle for the large insufficiencies of this culture, Our shallow attitude toward death, for our anxieties about feeling, for our reckless improvident responses to our real 'problems of growth,' for our inability to construct an advanced industrial society that properly regulates consumption, and for our justified fears of the increasingly violent course of history. The cancer metaphor will be made obsolete, I would predict, long before the problems it has reflected so vividly will be resolved."

M: Which page was that on?

A: Eighty-seven. Page eighty-seven.

K: It's the last paragraph of the book.

CUT