

After battling a major illness which corresponded with her witnessing the September 11 attacks in NYC, Keiko Sato radically changed her working methods and started to search for new insights into her life and work. She began digging up memories of her father who served as a Kamikaze Pilot in the Army. It prompted a larger project about the history and survival politics of her family and her country; Japan. The first part of her trip is documented in a video focusing on her return to Japan and the meeting with her family. Transcripts of a series of interviews with cultural and political figures from her father's generation have been edited and pre-published as an overture to the making of a book which documents the full project. On the wall she started to re-contextualize the photos and writings she collected during her visit. She documented this ongoing work in a weblog (<http://www.lacinca.net/ura>) along with interviews she conducted with visitors who came to witness her progress and research she conducted during the La Cinca project. She intends to finalize her project with the making of a book that reflects the experiences, interviews and ideas that arose during the making of her project. In an interview published here, she spoke with Miklós about her findings in Japan and her work period in the Veenvloer.

M:

For 3 months you have worked in the Veenvloer on your project. On one of the walls in the space you wrote, erased, constructed and configured your interpretation of historical and personal events that occurred before and during a specific period in Japanese history. You included many statements and written excerpts from others. This is the first time, as far as I know, that your work visually refers to factual occurrences. Can you tell something about the relationship between the different elements you tried to put together

K:

The project involved a lot of research and I read many books on Japan before, during and after the second world war; roughly from the 30's till the 60's. While doing so I started to remember things from my past. My father served in the Japanese Army as a kamikaze pilot but he survived because his plane didn't carry enough fuel. I was collecting images related to his and other events and I came across an image of a kamikaze pilot making preparations to go to war. I started to apply the things I read onto myself and created a mixture of associations which were partly based on facts and partly on memories. Maybe that's the way the brain works; images stimulate the remembrance of certain events and evoke associations triggering me to become very conscious of the content of what I read, heard and saw.

M:

Part of the work you did was to combine different elements of Japan's history with personal stories. You started to create relationships which weren't necessarily connected to each other. Which of these elements stood out for you?

K:

It's a funny thing that when I used the image of the kamikaze pilot I started to remember my grandmother. She is the first person who told me that my father served as a kamikaze pilot. I now remember this intuitive link which I made while working on the wall. I found another photo of a kamikaze pilot seen from behind, I combined this with a photo of a piece I did

which consisted of broken glass, I incorporated these two parts in a collage and included the face of my grandmother. These unconscious associations triggered a relation with the events that occurred in Hiroshima and I specifically associated them with the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. I remembered how Ishimaru (Ishimaru Katsuzo: A Japanese Artist whom I interviewed when I was doing research in Japan) spoke about the victims of the bombing of Hiroshima. He spoke about how they refused to be remembered as victims. Hariu (Hariu Ichiro: An Art and Literature critic living and working in Japan) whom I also interviewed mentioned that artists should never comply to the powers that be and need to address the suppressed in order to be able to produce truly autonomous work.

I did a series of interviews during my trip in Japan and the work I did on the wall here in the *Veemvloer* helped me to prioritize the different memories and associations I had.

M:

You mentioned that your father was a Kamikaze pilot, whom you had very little or no contact with. You went back to Japan to discover more about his life and evidently about your own life as well.

K:

I didn't know that much about his life because I never met him. I don't have any recollection of him, only the memories of others like my mother and her brother. But by going back and following his life's trail I learned a lot about my cultural background, about my roots and how I was formed as a human being. I didn't realize how much the post war period affected my life growing up in the 60's and 70's in Japan. After our defeat in the Second World War the country was restructured and briefly governed by foreigners, especially by the Americans. Democracy was not something we grew up with, it wasn't part of our roots. It was more or less forced upon us and so our country's political and social transformation didn't come naturally. It obviously affected our educational system, our standards, our way of living. We were concerned with building up our country's economy and we got a lot of exposure from American culture, but contrary to the situation in the U.S. we did not have sufficient possibilities to freely discuss the events that led up to the war. There simply wasn't any time to reflect on the information that we learned in school. This had a great impact on me. I started to become more involved in art and I started to study philosophy because I felt a lack of personal development.

In the West I was asked many times whether I was happy or not but In Japan I never asked myself this question. I had no father growing up, but I never thought I was unhappy. I was very poor as a child, my mother left my father after the war and she had to do everything to keep the family alive. We had to live with my grandmother in a very small space. I remember my best friend mocking me about our poorness. These kind of remarks made me very sad but I can't say that I was unhappy as a child.

M:

When you speak about your past, your father seems to have become an abstract figure intertwined with the course of Japan's National history. But I'm sure there is, as with every child-parent relationship a curiosity to discover whether your bond is genetic and he is truly part of you or not. In the project you are doing there is an apparent longing to connect with

something not clearly defined yet very emotional, which I suspect is rooted in the relation with your father.

K:

I recently spoke with a friend, her father experienced the war in Nijmegen and he has had severe side effects because of it. She lived with him, she didn't need to discover him since he had always been with her. She mentioned that I was never with close with my father, that this is something I lack. My stepfather never filled that role, he was in some ways a transparent man, he was important to me, a nice man but I never related to him as a father. My uncle Norio, did fill that role to some extent. The people I interviewed when I went back to Japan were all about the same age as my father.

M:

Your project can be roughly categorized in 3 parts:

- The interviews you conducted with the people who came to visit your work in process in the Veemvloer space.
- You used a 10m x 3m wall in the Veemvloer space as a sketch-board to try, erase and most importantly construct your interpretation of both historical and personal events that occurred during the period you focused your research on. (The interviews and the progress of the wall are summarized on a website: <http://www.lacinka.net/ura>)
- And the third part is the video diary you made about your trip back to Japan.

These 3 different projects show different aspects of your personal involvement within the project. The 3 parts initially served as a build up to the book you will make which intends to bring everything together. But I was surprised at how the projects clearly showed how each medium has its own intrinsic qualities in terms of intimacy and the relationship it establishes with the viewer. On the wall you've been able to incorporate big issues and transform them into a personal understanding. In the video you have become closer to your father by merely following his life's trail and making a registration of it.

Are you interested to direct and develop these projects independently and turn them into separate works?

K:

When I filmed my trip and the scenes of my family I did that in order to find out things about my father, I never thought I would turn it into a video work. The video images started to function as a memory or record of my trip. I felt that I wanted to be closer to my father, but as I mentioned before, without any recollection of him I knew I would never reach or find him. And even if I would, I wouldn't be able to take back the life we never shared. Something between my father and I has been lost forever. That void as an abstract feeling could be a sort of motive for making the video as an art work.

The interviews published on the internet, the wall and the video are indeed different projects, establishing a different involvement of the individual versus the group or a culture. They are chosen to reflect the different stages of my research.

I'm thinking to make a video about Hashimoto (Hashimoto Akira is an artist I interviewed during my trip to Japan), he served in the Japanese Army in China during the Second World

war. He died recently when he was 83 years old, he's close to my father's age. They both experienced the war, by making his paintings he expressed his feelings during the war. He wasn't actively involved like my father was.

M:

How did the interviews you made with the people that visited your project contribute to your process?

K:

I consider the interviews to be part of my work and on the other hand I don't. The interviews are intended to represent the people who came to visit me and their reaction to the project. Their opinion contributed to my work, it was an important element in my research. I didn't think I was making a work, it felt more like a collaboration. It was something which felt natural to do. After I have made a transcript of all the talks I had I will have the time to filter the information and give it its proper place.

M:

Behind every person there are stories. How do the stories behind your father's life relate to your interpretation of the truth?

K:

Circumstances determine the life someone lives. My father was influenced by the war and by the political and social culture of that time. I cannot see him separately from the times he lived in. Therefore my search into his past became broadened. Japanese culture and history is very different history from the West. As a people we are first and foremost one collective, and then we consider ourselves individuals. If I dig into my own history I have to research a collective history at the same time. You cannot separate these two. My work is to make clear that there is no distinction between the two. The work I did on the wall shows that there is not one single truth but many.

The only certainty we humans have is that we all die at some point. Most things are relative. I don't believe in right or wrong. Even though I have my own personal standards and moral values.

In a war, if you win you are right, if you lose you are wrong.

M:

History is more often than not written that way, isn't it...

K:

I agree. That is why I didn't want to deal with a greater truth about good and bad when I worked on the wall. The important thing is not that we die but how we die. And for that matter how we live.

M:

Do you consider yourself to be a romantic?

K:

Yes one side of me perhaps. I'm not sure. I believe in humans and in myself. This makes me think of the stories about the survivors in Hiroshima. There were a lot of people in despair, bereft of hope and the lives of their loved ones, especially doctors who were continuously exposed to the horrors of the war. Some of them committed suicide but there were others who were more exposed to daily life activities and the building up of the country, these people were more hopeful; Kenzaburo Oe wrote extensively about them.

I believe in the existence of human beings. If that is considered romantic, then I am.

M

The horrors which happened in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Nanking Massacre (In 1937, Japanese soldiers looted the city of Nanking and slaughtered an estimated 300.000 Chinese soldiers and citizens and raped over 20.000 innocent women and children) and so on have the danger of becoming thematic barriers to your work. Since you are not a journalist but an artist, is there a burden connected to working with factual references?

K:

Like I said before, if I search my personal history, I have to research a collective history. Hiroshima does not relate directly to me. It is not so important to me whether I recognize Hiroshima and the Nanking Massacre as historical events. What I am interested in, is how these events are interwoven with my life and to find out where my connection lies with the persons who experienced the incidents. As humans we all have the possibility to become the one committing an act of violence just as we have a chance to become a victim of violence. All people, who died in Hiroshima and Nanking, are more than a mere number in a body count. Every life has a similar importance to mine and yours. Death is very individual and every person has a different story. When I make my work I feel empowered and encouraged by personal stories. In that sense Hiroshima and the Nanking massacre are very personal incidents for me.

Working on the wall and doing the interviews did take a lot of energy out of me I feel I need time to digest the things I did. When I'm working I don't think so much. After the working period in the Veemvloer was over I had to return and clean up the wall. I saw the work for the last time before taking it apart but I didn't understand anything of it. It takes time to digest the things you do.

M:

What is the difference in working on a horizontal surface vs. working on a vertical surface

K:

The viewpoint is different. When working on the floor I stand and look down. My physical point of view determines to a large extent how I perceive things. Usually when I'm doing floor pieces I use objects which I deconstruct by literally breaking their meaning so it becomes material. I was interested in transforming concrete material and everyday objects into a landscape. The floor is also near my feet. It is a base and I perceive it as something physical. Working on the wall with images and words I perceive as working with my head. The material and input like photo's, texts and thoughts all relate to real events. It feels as if I give an

insight into what's going on in my head.

When I worked too much on the wall I had to work on the floor piece. On the wall I focused on the upper side of my body and on the floor piece I focused on the lower part of my body. The difference between the two is like comparing the practical with the imaginary

To describe the wall piece right now is too difficult. It has similarities to working on the floor but it's very different. I linked images on the same intuitive level as I did when working on the floor, but there was a big difference in the emotional weight of the activity.

M:

Can you compare it with mowing the lawn or washing the dishes where the activity itself becomes subconscious?

K:

Yeah maybe, it's an interesting thought.

M:

Are you trying to forget when you work on the floor piece?

K:

Well, its like working with my subconscious, the moment I'm doing the work I don't fully realize what it is that I'm doing but afterwards I will remember the thoughts I had while doing it. During the making of a floor piece I sense that the material stimulates me to make and break forms, in a repeating fashion and so creating new forms, very similar to the making of a painting. Working with images and words is different in the sense that they bring me to other images, words and meaning. It seems similar to the process of multiplying but without the construction of form.