

## WEBINAR SUMMARY:

### **From Hiroshima and Minamata to today**

### **Socially engaged practices in post-war Japan**

With Dr Justin Jesty and Namiko Kunimoto

*Wednesday 14 September 2022*

#### **Dr Justin Jesty's Talk:**

Our talk today coincides with a couple of events that are happening in the UK right now. First is this exhibition of sketches and materials related to the atomic bomb panels. This is ending very soon, so if you have a chance please go out and see it. The second is a retrospective of Tsuchimoto Noriaki's documentary films, which is being held as part of the Open City Documentary Festival at the ICA. This also is ending fairly soon, so if you have a chance please check it out. There's some degree of randomness, I guess, in these events happening simultaneously, but there are historical connections between them. Akamatsu and Maruki collaborated on two films directed by Tsuchimoto, 'The Minamata Mural', which follows the couple for one year as they create an exhibit. The other is 'Hiroshima no Pika', which is a video version of one of Akamatsu's books for children about the atomic bombings. There's also an English version of 'Hiroshima No Pika' that has narration by Susan Sarandon. It's available on Amazon. It's a nice material, I think, for classrooms. It's meant to teach children about the bombings. So check it out if you're interested.

More broadly, both the Hiroshima exhibit and the Tsuchimoto retrospective offer glimpses into the work of creators who were active in Japan post 1945, who used their work to commemorate violent, traumatic events and to fight for a better present and future. Their work attempts to address issues that remain no less urgent today, war, especially its impact on civilians, nuclear weapons, and environmental justice. I'd like to use this as a theme or a point. Over the past 10 to 15 years, radical politics has become a major feature of global contemporary art, although not so much in Japan, where there is still quite a lot of censorship. I think this new sensitivity to the importance of artists' voices on

and in political movements creates the conditions for the atomic bomb panels and Tsuchimoto's work to be appreciated again in new ways.

So let me begin. I'll start by talking about the panels. I usually refer to the Hiroshima panels as the atomic bomb panels. The panels themselves are quite large. They're 1.8 meters high and 7.2 meters long. There are 15 in all. These are the first three panels that were all painted in 1950. The top panel is titled 'Ghosts', the middle one is titled 'Fire', and the bottom one is 'Water'. This panel is called Maduki. The format itself is quite unusual. The combination of Maruki's training in ink painting, and Akamatsu's training in oil painting, brings together two painting traditions that are almost never combined, and the compositions are odd. There's a lot of empty space. Especially in the first three there's no clear background. The human forms are wobbly and irregular, grouped too close together and then too far apart. I guess the point I want to make is that the panels are quite unique as compositions, and for all of their size, they don't feel monumental. One effect of the scale is that the human forms in the panels are about life-size. They're remarkably approachable, fragile, vulnerable, and they offer no sense of finality or closure. I want to emphasize that lack of finality and closure. They were always part of an ongoing project, and in a very real way, they opened up a space for dialogue, sharing, and change that I'll talk about over the next couple of minutes.

Maruki Iri was a native of Hiroshima, and his family lived there at the time of the bombing. He was living in Tokyo, but when he heard that a terrible new bomb had been dropped, he hurried back, arriving in Hiroshima three days after the blast. Akamatsu followed a week later, and they stayed for several weeks after. So they saw plenty of destruction, but they did not see the scenes that they painted in the first three panels with their own eyes. The sources for their paintings were stories that survivors and eyewitnesses had related to them. They were based on verbal accounts, most of which they gathered three years later, in 1949 and 1950. There were other sources, too. As Kozo Asetsuko's research has shown, the mother and child at the center of water, and the dead child at the bottom of fire, were modeled on photographs that had evaded U. S. occupation censorship, and were being circulated through Communist Party networks. The panels then are not testimony to the artist's individual witnessing of the events, but to a narration that was already part of a community, and that community kept expanding as the artists exhibited the panels to wider and wider audiences.

In 1950 and 1951, Maruki and Akamatsu carried the first three panels from place to place on a countrywide exhibition tour. With nothing but the National Railroad and their own feet to move paintings, they held exhibitions in 51 locations. Of course, they had help from an expanding array of peace and anti-nuclear war organizations. These organizations helped the Marukis make contact with people in the places that they visited, who could help them set up the exhibit. The exhibits were held in department stores, country inns, schools, universities, temples, but not museums. Each exhibit

would stay in one place for three or four days and each day one of the artists, usually Akamatsu, would make a presentation or sometimes several presentations throughout the day. Her presentations were often in the form of a dramatic performance; she told stories based on the panels, sometimes half-sung in a kind of improvised vocal style, shifting voice frequently and often speaking laments from the perspective of the dead, where there was a lot of participation from the audience. Pretty much everywhere they went, there would be someone in the audience who had experienced the bombings themselves and would often speak up. Over 600,000 people saw these exhibitions in 1950 and 1951.

After the Marukis had taken the panels around for two years, two young activists took over the exhibition. In 1952 and 1953 they brought the paintings to nearly 800,000 more people in 96 locations, so altogether well over 1 million people in Japan saw these paintings between 1950 and 1953. From 1953 they began to travel internationally, with the UK being one of their first stops. I believe that they were in the UK in 1953 and 1955.

I want to make three points about this exhibition tour that became a global exhibition tour in the 1950s and 60s. The first thing is that the first five panels were all made during the US occupation. Publication about the atomic bombs was illegal, it was forbidden by the censorship policy up to 1949 and by the press code thereafter. So these exhibitions were in a legal gray zone. There were several instances of local collaborators getting arrested for written materials that were related to the exhibits. A picture book about the bombing that Akamatsu Maruki produced in 1950, titled 'Pikadon' or 'Flash Boom', was banned and the original manuscript was confiscated from the publishers. Almost nobody in Japan had seen any kind of visual representation of the aftermath of the bombings. The leading photo magazine, 'Asahi Graph', famously broke this seven-year-old story when they published a special feature on August 6, 1952, the first anniversary after the end of the U. S. occupation, so the exhibitions made a major intervention into the culture and the politics of the occupation period.

The second thing I'd like to note is that the exhibitions dramatize how the atomic bomb panels are not simply images or they're not simply paintings; they're not visible to us today simply because they exist materially. They're visible to us today because of all of the activity and effort that Maruki, Akamatsu, and so many others put into making them visible. Images undoubtedly have their own power, but they're also exceedingly unwieldy and fragile, requiring tremendous effort and resources to produce, display, and preserve. I think that we should include the exhibitions, which continue all through the 50s, 60s, and 70s, as part of the work proper.

Performance studies scholar Shannon Jackson has argued that arts institutionality, something that I might broaden to its social existence, can be thought of as a durational performative process rather than a static structure, less an object than a process. We can bring that idea to bear here. I think that the

case of the atomic bomb panel shows quite vividly how what we see and what we look at as art always rests on the activities of people and collectivities, keeping certain things visible. I think bringing that into the realm of the works and not trying to keep it backstage enriches our experience of them.

The third and final point I'd like to make about the exhibitions is that they were events. They included performances. They were teach-ins. They were participatory. People left written comments or spoke up and talked to the artists and organizers. Akamatsu and Maruki learned from this, and often integrated what they got into future works. The subject of 'Rainbow' came to them in this way; people told them about how a rainbow appeared in the sky after the black rain had stopped. From the early panels, their exhibitions often hosted signature campaigns. In the tenth panel, that enters the picture itself as a subject. So the paintings themselves register the collaborative nature of the couple's ongoing work. They were continually responding to the people around them.

I think you can see this in the expansion of their subject matter in the 1970s and 1980s. They heard other perspectives and endeavored to bring it into their work. 'Death of American POWs' is about American POWs who were in Hiroshima when it was bombed. Crows symbolically references ethnic Koreans who were victims. The four larger works that are not considered part of the series of 15 panels, clearly move beyond the focus on Hiroshima. This includes Minamata, which was the site of the largest incident of environmental mercury poisoning I believe ever. The Minamata Mercury Poisoning, and I'm going to play a clip from the film that's going to be screened this weekend or next weekend. I think it gives a very good sort of sense of this mural, which is much larger than the Hiroshima panels.

The Minamata Mercury Poisoning case became one of the major social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. There were many artists, writers, dramatists, students, and photographers who participated in bringing attention to the plight of the impoverished fisher people of Minamata, who had had their health and their livelihoods destroyed by a huge industrial chemical plant that was dumping untreated organic mercury into Minamata Bay, where it got into the food chain through fish. Maruki and Akamatsu decided to create a work around Minamata, I think largely because of their friendship with poet, writer, and activist Ishimura Michiko, who was a long-standing advocate for the Minamata patients. Once they started work on the painting, Tsuchimoto heard about it, and initially he went to meet them to share some of his materials with them. He had already made several films about the incident. It was only after meeting them that Tsuchimoto and his producer decided to make a film about their process of creating this work.

The lack of planning was typical of Tsuchimoto's work. Tsuchimoto was part of a generation of politically active and formerly experimental filmmakers. His work is characterized by a particular approach to filmmaking, which saw documentary film as something that emerged from the

relationship between the filmmakers and the film subject. He didn't use scripts. The exact shape of the film emerged in dialogue with the people in the film. The films weren't solely the work of the author, the filmmaker, looking out at the world and trying to impose a kind of order, but emerged intersubjectively between the filmmakers and the people appearing. One of Tsuchimoto's juniors remembered this practice as symbiotic, and I think that's a good metaphor. Tsuchimoto himself used the phrase, 'film is a work of living beings.' Rather than a technical procedure of sort of cutting and splicing, film's work took place in the specific relationships and interactions among the living beings who participated in its creation.

This emphasis on dialogue is something that I think draws their work together. If you watch the film, Tsuchimoto is interested in how Maruki and Akamatsu's work changes in response to interactions with the Minamata patients. The second half of the film is all about that interaction and its effect. Another parallel about their work is that both Tsuchimoto and Akamatsu Maruki devoted much of their life to a single cause or group of people. It's kind of a life work. This is what I think enables their work to attain a level of profound insight, combined with a kind of looseness or vulnerability that gives it some warmth or sense of humanity or humaneness.

In wrapping up, I'd like to step out of the historical narrative mode a bit and kind of close with a couple of thoughts for the present. These, to some degree, parallel the three points I made about the panels and their exhibition. I mentioned how the panels were an intervention in the early 1950s because of the way that they defied censorship of images of the atomic bombings. They're still an intervention. Since the early 1950s, when they were first made, to the present day, nuclear weapons have been and remain the greatest threat to the survival of humankind, and hundreds of thousands of other species on the planet. The public's general lack of knowledge about this issue may not be because of censorship per se, but I think it's fair to call it a conspiracy of silence. I think compared to climate change, the nuclear threat is really much more present. I don't think we should approach the issue as if it's been dealt with. People in the 1950s were a lot more on the ball about it than I think we are today.

Second, related to the point that images are fragile and unwieldy, and how it takes a lot of work and dedication to make images visible: that also remains no less true today. The Maruki Gallery, where most of the panels are on permanent display, is an old building. It doesn't have any sort of national level support at all. It doesn't have climate control. Heavy rains have caused flooding a couple of times recently. They're in the middle of a funding campaign for a building renovation and for restoration work for the panels. So please consider donating, that's the only way they can do it.

Finally, in relation to the participatory and eventful side of the panels in their exhibition, they are still very much a living, active part of culture. The Maruki Gallery has quite a large exhibition space on the

first floor. Over the past 10 years, they've invited contemporary artists to install their works there in a series of really interesting exhibitions. This is just a partial list. But it includes several leading contemporary artists, some of whom have experienced censorship at Japan's mainstream museums. So if you're able to get to Japan at some point and want to go to a museum, please look up the Maruki Gallery and see what's on. It's quite likely to be one of the most challenging, playful, thought-provoking exhibitions you can find. With that, I will finish my talk.