

Pika-Boo: Public Performance Art works as an Act of Mutual Forgiveness and Understanding of the Second World War and the Atomic Bomb Incidents.

Too Chee Hung

Introduction

I first encountered Iri and Toshi Maruki's Hiroshima Panels in the summer of 2010, on the insistence of a friend who had made last-minute arrangements for me to visit the Maruki Gallery which houses the art works. I somewhat reluctantly made the almost two-hour journey to Saitama Prefecture. I say reluctantly, because I knew that the works were in response to the Hiroshima atomic bombings. I have a general distaste for artworks created in response to trauma, and this was the most traumatic incident to have struck Japan in recent history. In any case, I obliged.

Confronted by the Hiroshima Panels, I was overcome by the human realities the Hiroshima bombing incident.

It was a procession of ghosts; in an instant all clothing was burned off. Hands, faces, and breasts swelled up.

The purple blisters on their skin soon burst and peeled off, hanging down like pieces of rags.

With hands half lifted up, they were like ghosts in a procession.

Dragging their ragged skin behind them, exhausted, they fell down, moaning in heaps and died, one after another.

At the center of the explosion, the temperature reached six thousand degrees.

The above is an excerpt from the caption for "Ghosts", the first of the 15 Hiroshima Panels jointly painted by the husband and wife painting duo, Iri and Toshi Maruki. According to the information at the museum, they finished the first Hiroshima Panel in 1950 and devoted the next 32 years to creating the remaining panels. This became their response to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, the aftermath of which they had witnessed when they returned to Hiroshima three days after the bombing to help in the recovery of Iri's affected family members and community.

I was not an expert in history; however I did have a rough idea of what happened in the past. I was aware of the wars fought. The education I received in Malaysia taught me about the Japanese colonization of Malaya and the former's exploits in the Asia Pacific region. This information was coupled with many anecdotal stories told by my late grandparents; of the loss of loved ones, of starvation, hardship, and the fear of rape, torture, and their own mortality. I was well aware that the Japanese occupation in Malaya was the most traumatic period my own nation had endured in recent history.

Prior to my encounter with the Hiroshima Panels, the twin atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki merely meant the end of the Second World War to me. Despite the despicable inhumanity of the atomic bomb, it symbolized the liberation of nations and the end of the suffering brought upon by the Japanese empire's colonization of the Asia Pacific region. For me, the atomic bombs were a solution to a long, protracted situation.



“In 1945, the Allied Forces began pressuring Japan to voluntarily surrender. As a result of their refusal, the Allied Forces dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, and subsequently on Nagasaki on 9 August. In the end, Japan surrendered unconditionally on 15 August 1945. General Seishiro Itagaki, the leader of the Japanese army in Malaya surrendered to Allied Forces in Singapore”.

(Ramlah et al. 2010, p.27;
translated from Bahasa Malaysia)

The above is an excerpt from a Malaysian history textbook taught to 15-year-old secondary students and taken from a chapter about the Japanese occupation in Malaya. That paragraph, accompanied by an image of the atomic bomb mushroom cloud, was all there was to describe the atomic bomb incident. Unlike the descriptions by the Marukis, the text lacks humanity and says very little about the extent of the destruction and suffering caused.

My first encounter with the Hiroshima Panels also reminded me of an event that had taken place about 10 years ago when I visited the War Memorial Museum in the remote northern state of Kelantan, Malaysia. Considering that Malaysia’s only involvement in any major wars was with the Japanese invasion and occupation of Malaya during the Second World War (besides the emergency period of 1948-1960 which has never been officially recognized as a war), the museum displays were primarily about that. During my visit there, I observed an elderly Japanese couple weeping profusely in a discreet manner. It occurred to me that they were likely learning for the first time about the foreign exploits of the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. It was then that I realized (and later confirmed), that most Japanese people had no knowledge of what happened outside of Japan during the war.

Similarly, I found myself in the same position as that elderly couple when I saw the Hiroshima Panels. I realized that I myself had little to no knowledge of what had happened in Japan during the Second World War. As a Malaysian, I had always seen us as being on the receiving end of wartime atrocities.

Little did I realize that Japan too, despite being the aggressor nation, had its fair share of suffering and loss.

Objectives

Considering the obvious gaps in knowledge that exist, and that each party considers itself as the ultimate victim of the Second World War, first and foremost I wanted to find a way to use performance art as a means to bridge this knowledge gap in our understanding of this shared history. I wanted to develop a shared collective history of the events that took place, in spite of the bias of our own official versions.

Secondly, this was an experiment in using performance art as a medium to deal with difficult issues. I was aware that “to deal with”, in this case, was subjective, and was subject to whatever was disparate and problematic about the issue; e.g. whatever was misunderstood, forgotten, falsified, unresolved, denied, misrepresented, etc. In the case of “difficult issues”, few were more difficult or more taboo than the issues surrounding the Second World War and the atomic bomb incidents (hereon referred to as the “subject matter”), for reasons that will be explained later in this paper.

Methodology

I devised and performed a series of seven performance art works while in Japan. In the process of developing these performances, I sought to learn about and understand the following:

- The events surrounding Japan’s involvement in the Second World War and the atomic bombing incidents.
- The current state of understanding of the subject matter among Japanese people, and its associated sentiments and sensitivities.
- The artistic works and strategies undertaken (particularly performance art) to address the subject matter.

For the purpose of the above matters, I spoke to and interviewed various individuals from the fields

of history, sociology, activism, politics and art. I also read and referred to books written about the above matters. Besides that, I visited the locations most affected by the incidents; Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Okinawa. There I was able to visit the museums commemorating the events and speak to locals and experts on the issue.

As much as the performances were the end result of the project itself, they too were a means of conducting research and data-gathering. I used the performances as a means to engage audiences, to tap into their knowledge and gauge their reactions to the subject matter and the medium of performance art. To a certain extent, each performance was a reaction and response to previous performances. Future performances were devised based on the lessons learnt of the issues, realities, and limitations of current situations, both regarding the subject matter and the medium of performance art.

Whenever possible, these performances were performed in a public space. “Public space” is defined as a space where anyone may enter and exit freely without the consent of strangers, and without declaration of purpose. It is a space that allows social interactions. Whether a space is privately owned or otherwise is irrelevant as long as it fulfils the said criteria.



Pika-boo (November 2011)

Pika-boo (a wordplay on the Japanese “pika”, a word used to denote the blinding flash of the atomic bomb, and “peekaboo”, an expression used when playing the childhood game hide-and-seek) was billed as: an attempt to uncover the hidden truths behind the Second World War and the atomic bomb incidents. Performed at the artist-run space Kotaka Syouten, this performance involved me playing a game of hide-and-seek with the audience. I devised

this performance with the intention to gauge the level of knowledge and understanding of the subject matter among young people.

The performance began with me hiding in the surrounding neighborhood. When the audience arrived at the space, they were tasked to look for me. Once found, I returned to the space with the audience. There, I began to read a chapter from a Malaysian history textbook titled “The Japanese Occupation” in the Bahasa Malaysian language, which was then translated into Japanese. After that, it was the audience’s turn to hide in the surrounding neighborhood and for me to seek them. Once found, each person was required to tell me a story he/she knew about the subject matter. This could be either oral or official in origin. When everyone was found, we returned to the space for a discussion.

It was here, at the very beginning of my project, that I found my premise to be flawed. As the audience told me about the subject matter, I observed that many of them faced great difficulty and discomfort in doing so. Very few had anything to say; most regurgitated the often-repeated facts of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. A few confessed that they never knew Japan had once occupied foreign territory. When asked if they had heard any stories from their grandparents about wartime suffering, the standard answer was “no” and that their grandparents did not like to talk about past sufferings. This was in direct contrast to my experience (and to a certain extent, the experience of most, if not all Malaysians) as my late grandparents had often told me of the suffering they experienced during the Japanese occupation, if only to remind me to be thankful for the comfortable existence I enjoyed in the present.

In the discussions that followed, I was shocked to learn that the subject matter was barely covered in official textbooks and in history education in Japan. Participants mentioned that history was only taught up to the Meiji period (1912) and that the Second World War in its entirety took up merely a few pages.

Another participant claimed that her knowledge of the subject matter only began when she was traveling in Southeast Asia as a university student.

This I found later in my research and in the many casual conversations I had with young people, to be a recurring scenario. Many confessed to me of the shame they felt when confronted by friends in Southeast Asia about the subject matter, and when elderly folks told them about the harsh and atrocious treatment they received under the Japanese occupation. One woman recounted her shock when an elderly man she met stood up and sang to her the Japanese National Anthem, “Kimigayo” (it was a requirement under the Japanese Occupation for students to sing the Kimigayo during school morning assemblies). All of them realized then that they knew nothing of the deep pain and trauma their own country had inflicted upon the rest of Asia. Most of them, having had such encounters, eventually took it upon themselves to do their own research to learn about the subject matter.

I then needed to seriously evaluate the feasibility of my original premise of “bridging the gaps in knowledge”. How could I bridge a gap in knowledge when what existed was not a chasm, but a cliff? The bridging of knowledge can only take place when both parties have sufficient knowledge to share. This was not the case, not after there had been systematic and deliberate attempts to erase and alter the past, both through government and civil society efforts. The people seemed to have developed what I came to think of as a “national collective amnesia” through the acts of textbook revisionism, media manipulation, and the oppression of individuals seeking justice for the wrongs done against them. The ignorance or lack of awareness of the participants of “pika-boo” and the people that I subsequently spoke to, confirmed to me that this assault on history and the truth had been a resounding success.

Any effort to bridge gaps in knowledge, or to seek mutual understanding and forgiveness, seemed to ring hollow in the presence of this elephant in the room. Forgiveness becomes meaningless when none of us knows exactly what it is that we are forgiving each other for, and becomes more problematic when its intentions are misunderstood. At this point, I was reminded of the many people

who had asked me what do we (as Malaysians) have to ask the Japanese to forgive us for, when it seemed that the Japanese were the ones who had all the reasons to ask us for forgiveness.

I was not unaware that non-Japanese too are often ignorant of the subject matter. I had been accused many times of holding double standards against the Japanese. I stood guilty of that charge as I myself, prior to my interest in this subject matter, was almost completely uninformed. However, I felt I could and can assert that indeed, a double standard needs to be applied, considering the differences in the level of involvement of the various parties in the Second World War. Japan, whose actions in the war were comparable to those of Nazi Germany, must be held to much higher standards of responsibility. I do not need to mention in detail the atrocities committed by the Japanese Imperial Army in Asia for these are very well documented; however, we need to remember that 25,000,000 individuals (about 10 percent of them Japanese) died as a result of Imperial Japan’s senseless ambitions.

While the Germans have criminalized the denial of their country’s wartime atrocities, Japanese ultraconservative revisionism activists have successfully revised history textbooks, sugarcoating and eliminating traces of wartime atrocities. In any country, it is easy to dismiss the existence of ultranationalist and right wing extremists as a minority fringe. By contrast, the critical problem in Japan is the fact that key support for historical revisionism comes from the very core of Japan’s political and economic leadership (Metraux, 2003, 304).

Considering the enormity of its involvement, I considered it scandalous, and morally reprehensible, that Japanese people were made unaware of this history. John W. Dower, in his essay *War, Peace, and Beauty* in response to the Hiroshima Panels, wrote:

‘Indeed, as time passes and new generations come to the scene, memory fades; and as new nationalisms, alliances, and technologies of destruction are promoted, the past is deliberately obscured’.

(Dower, 1985, 9)



Target Practice (December 2011)

“Target Practice” was performed at the 18th Nippon International Performance Art Festival (NIPAF) Asia 2012. In an attempt to understand and immerse myself in the performance art scene in Japan, I participated in the said festival, which took place in Tokyo and Nagano over two weeks.

A reenactment of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombing incidents, this performance was my response to a statement by Iri Maruki’s mother, Suma Maruki, who once said, “Atom bombs do not fall by themselves, someone has to drop them”.

I began by placing two cups on the floor. The position of each represented Hiroshima and Nagasaki in relation to where I was sitting, which represented Tokyo. With 60 eggs, I began my attempt to ‘bomb’ Hiroshima by attempting to throw an egg into the cup that represented it. When Hiroshima was bombed, I proceeded to target “Nagasaki”. The performance ended when both cities were bombed. In the first instance, 54 eggs were used.

An awkward silence filled the room, punctuated only by the sound of eggs breaking on the floor, one after another. After the night’s program, members of the audience and fellow artists approached me to tell me of the many audience members who complained to them about the discomfort they felt as they watched the eggs fall and break, one by one. While direct confrontation is usually shunned in Japan, a more vocal member of the audience berated me for wasting food in such a manner.

I considered this performance a success. Not because I threw eggs into cups, but because I managed to cause such discomfort to the audience. While the

wasting of food is taboo in most cultures, in Japan, any taboo is exponentially magnified. The list of taboos in Japan includes the subject matter, which many would agree is the biggest taboo around.

One contributor to the success of the revisionist movement in relation to “the subject matter” is precisely this observation; that Japanese people generally avoid taboo, negative, uncomfortable, and difficult issues. In the many conversations I had with Japanese people, be their friends, associates, or acquaintances, they seemed to experience a high level of discomfort when I tried to engage them in conversations regarding the subject matter or other issues of such magnitude. Many found ways to change the subject. Some, at the onset, just asked, “can we not talk about this?” (or its equivalent). Those who did allow me to engage them in the subject matter often did so with much pain in their facial expressions, usually punctuated by the ominous “hissing” sound often made by Japanese people when searching for the right words to say. At first I thought that this could be a problem when conversing in English, a language that they were not familiar with. However, I found the same thing occurred even when I was conversing through an interpreter and the individual was speaking in Japanese.

According to Professor Okahara Masayuki, a sociology professor at Keio University, Tokyo, this can be attributed to the “*meiwakku deshita*” (めいわくでした) phenomenon. This simply means “to not cause inconvenience/anxiety for others”, which is a central approach to living for all Japanese people. *Meiwakku deshita* governs all aspects of social life in Japan, from one’s social interaction at home, school, work, to how one behaves in public. An example cited by Okahara was a common phenomenon in university classrooms. He claimed that it is considered a faux pas for a lecturer to ask difficult questions that would require critical thinking in class, for this would bring anxiety upon a student to give a correct and satisfactory answer in front of everyone. The failure to do so would eventually result in a sense of shame for that said student. Hence, in the spirit of *meiwakku deshita*, critical discourses are rarely held. As shocking as this is, it was later confirmed by conversations with other academics and lecturers.



To See You Again (February 2012)

Considering that “public performance art works” were to be the eventual outcomes of my project, I knew would have to experience for myself what it was like to perform in public spaces in Tokyo and to get to know the types of parameters that existed. I also wanted to test how far I could push these parameters before I got in trouble with the authorities.

For this purpose I invited Sakiko Yamaoka, a veteran artist based in Saitama, Japan, to collaborate with me. To push the boundaries of acceptance, I proposed that we perform a real act of violence, in this case, the two of us slapping each other indiscriminately. Yamaoka suggested that we perform this in five different locations in Tokyo, which would help me experience the different environments and audiences unique to each location. We decided to perform at the Imperial Palace, Ginza, Akihabara, Roppongi and Shibuya.

Prior to the performance, we agreed to arrive at each location on the hour, and travel to each location individually. The first person to arrive chose a position and stood still while waiting for the other. When the other person arrived, he/she would stand two feet directly in front of the first person. We then began the indiscriminate act of slapping each other. The performance ended when either of us decided to remove ourselves and travel to the next location. The performance was repeated until it was performed at all the locations.

Looking at the video documentation that I have of this performance, I realized that public performance art might not be the most effective medium in

Tokyo. As a city, Tokyo is an assault on the senses. The excessive lights and neon signs; the constant blaring of music and noise; the swarms of people moving from one place to another; the deviant subcultures of young people in costumes and extreme make-up; the non-stop assault of commercial advertising both in passive and human form. Tokyo presents many distractions to its inhabitants. It occurred to me that there was so much strangeness in Tokyo that people are generally immune to public spectacles and mostly ignore them. People were either ignoring, or making an effort to ignore, the performance. The fact that the action we presented was such an awkward spectacle did not help in our efforts to gain an audience.

I realized that public performances and actions would need to include the direct participation of the audience themselves. Passive performances like this one would have no impact on the audience at all, besides their asking the equivalent of, “what the hell is that?”



Cuci: The Performance (March 2012)

This performance was held at the Maruki Gallery housing the Hiroshima Panels. Although this was not performed in a public space, it was done with the objective of interacting with the specific audiences of the museum, a generally older audience aged 40 years and beyond.

Having only interacted with artists and younger people (besides many experts and academics) on the subject matter, I felt that it was important for me to talk to ordinary older folks who were alive at a time closer to the war, or who had actually

experienced the war first-hand. Like in some of my previous performances, I had decided that the act of foot-washing was a perfect way to create an awkward environment to talk about an awkward subject matter.

I set up a foot-washing station in the middle of the main hall in the Maruki Gallery. The main hall is usually the last gallery a visitor would enter, after looking at all the 15 Hiroshima Panels. It contains works in response to other atrocities, like Auschwitz and the Nanking Massacre. Through an interpreter, I offered visitors in the hall that I would serve them tea and wash their feet. Once they were seated, I also offered them a flyer containing an essay on the intentions of my performance. I prepared a cup of tea and the hot water to wash their feet. I then served the cup of tea, and proceeded to wash their feet. While doing this, I stroked up conversations with the participants through my interpreter. The performance ended when the conversation between the participant and me was over.

In total, I washed the feet of 15 people over the course of two days, about half the total number of visitors to the museum on that cold winter weekend. This had been a very humbling experience and had generated the most meaningful conversations I had with people in Japan throughout my entire time there. Many of the participants remarked that not only had they never had their feet washed by others before, they also had never had such a frank conversation about the war before. At the end of one of the conversations, a participant commented, "Perhaps it is because I am showing and letting you touch my feet, which I consider to be extremely private, is why I am opening myself up to you".

Another participant, with whom I have kept in touch ever since, commented to me after a few weeks, that having her feet washed and talking about the subject matter felt like a 'ghost' has been lifted from her shoulders. A woman in her forties, she had previously believed that one should never talk about such matters. However, after doing so at the performance, she realized that it is actually possible to do so and wondered why she had prevented from doing so before. All she had to do was to open her mouth.

What is this "ghost" that had stopped her from talking about such matters? I would like to attribute this to the social homogeneity that exists in Japan. One could dispute the stereotype of Japan as a homogenous country. This is a fair question, as there are actually many different groups in Japan. The discreet and introverted urbanites of the Kanto region (where Tokyo lies) differ from those who live in the Kansai region who are more vocal and friendly. There are the quiet agrarian societies of the rural regions, and the indigenous communities of *Hokkaido* (the northern-most region) and *Okinawa* (the southernmost region). There are also many people of Chinese and Korean origins who have settled in Japan. On top of that, economic migrants from China, South Asia, West Asia, and the west continue to flock to Japan. Indeed, like any other developed nation, Japan can be considered a melting-pot of peoples.

Here, the term "melting pot" is extremely appropriate within the context of Japan. It is a melting pot because it seems as though all the ingredients of different peoples and cultures have melted into a giant uniform liquid, its contents indistinguishable and modulated by the conditions within the pot. Despite the many different people that exist in Japan, it has occurred to me that there seems to be an unknown force that pressures people to conform to the local culture, a certain "*Japanism*" that governs daily living and being in Japan. Japan is well known for its customs and social decorum, many of which are exclusively unique to Japan, and the strict adherence to which is necessary for one to be "Japanese" or risks ostracism. The never-ending bowing, exchange of name cards, the long list of dining etiquettes, the respect for hierarchy, mobile phone use, and of course "*meiwakku deshita*".

All this explained the "ghost" that has prevented the woman from speaking about the subject matter. The necessity to be like everyone else had resulted in the need to not inconvenience others by introducing uncomfortable subject matters. Was this homogeneity the ghost that prevented her from talking? Did this homogeneity also mean that since it was considered proper to not talk about this subject matter, that it would never warrant any real, and proper discussion? Does proper social decorum take precedence over doing what is morally responsible?



Loss In Translation (May 2012)

After “Cuci”, I decided that I would like to find ways, or rather, excuses, to talk to my audience. Realizing that the collective amnesia surrounding the subject matter was quite severe, I abandoned efforts to bridge the gap in knowledge and instead began to create entry points in which I could find ways to implant awareness of the Second World War (and the extent of Japanese involvement).

After I had performed “To See You Again” with Sakiko Yamaoka, she gave me a set of Japanese war song cassettes which contained war songs dating back as far as the late 1800s and into the mid-1900s. The cassettes had belonged to her late father, whom she said was a staunch conservative.

I walked around with the cassette player and a clipboard with a notebook. I asked individuals who were seated, “Excuse me, do you speak English”, in Japanese. If they said “yes”, or “a little”, I proceeded to sit down next to them, introduce myself and explain my intentions... “Hi, my name is chi too, I am an artist from Malaysia. I am here in Japan to do research about the Second World War and in my research I found these war song cassettes. Since I do not understand Japanese, I would like to ask if you can help me translate them into English”. If they agreed to do so, I passed them the clipboard with a pen and began to play the music. The performance ended when the participant had finished translating a song, or had requested to leave. The performance was repeated many times.

Unlike “Cuci”, in which “audiences” were visitors to the museum, and who had come prepared to engage with the subject matter, this performance did not have that benefit. Although conducted with the same intentions, in this case I was shoving the issue down the throats of those, whom I would say, I had “tricked” into participating. Many, upon realizing that I was there to deal with the Second World War, immediately requested or made excuses to leave. Those who agreed to participate could not wait for the experience to be over. Most of the interactions were uncomfortable and tense, and there were no opportunities at all to have conversations about the subject matter.

There was an incident that I found recurring too often for me to say that it was an isolated case. Upon hearing me say “World War Two”, the person’s facial expression would immediately change. He/she would then excuse him/herself, look at his/her mobile phone, tell me that they had to go, and take leave, only to have me bump into them five minute later at a different location.

In the end, I felt that this performance was too confrontational and, most likely, simply alienated my participants. I have no qualms in acknowledging that this performance was a failure as I failed to engage with anyone in any meaningful conversations about the subject matter. I was in a state of doubt. I had become an obnoxious foreigner trying to remind Japanese people of a past that they were uncomfortable with, a history that they had no responsibility or control over. Yet, I held them accountable.

My values seemed incompatible with local social norms. My confrontational approaches had definitely caused much discomfort. I could not help but feel that I had alienated my audiences, my friends and all the generous people who had helped me with the project. Worse, considering my position as a Malaysian, and the nature of the subject matter, it had occurred to me that my position and project had become “uncriticizable”.



The Malaysia-Japan Senninbari Of Peace and Forgiveness (June 2012)

Given the lukewarm response I received from “Loss In Translation”, I decided to take on a softer approach by making a *senninbari*. The *senninbari* is an old war-time custom whereby women would ask 1,000 other women to contribute a stitch each to a piece of cloth that would be given to their men as an amulet for protection on the war front.

I learned about the *senninbari* in my research about the role of women in the war. At this point, I had resolved that interactions should be kept simple and the performance would only serve the purpose of creating an entry-point to the subject matter. Ultimately, I wanted to leave the participants with the question, “Why is a Malaysian making a *senninbari* in Japan?”

I approached strangers (men and women) who seemed to be just standing around and asked them, “Can you help me?” in Japanese while showing them a sheet containing my intentions and instructions in Japanese. If the person agreed, I gave him/her the *senninbari* and guided him/her through the stitching process. If the participant was able to speak English, I attempted to strike up a conversation about the subject matter. The process was to be repeated until I got 1,000 stitches on my *senninbari*.

People seemed more willing to participate in making the *senninbari*. I believed this was because it required a lot less attention and commitment. With an unwilling audience, simple actions encourage participation. I also wondered if participation was a result of the audience’s sympathy for my monumental task of acquiring 1,000 stitches.



Cut Grass Piece (July 2012)

After conducting a total of six performances in Tokyo, I decided that performances involving passive audiences would be most effective in a city where people are generally private, discreet and non-confrontational in nature.

In this performance, I set out to cut an individual blade of grass for each of the 71,012,650 deaths caused by the Second World War.

Originally conceived to be performed in the grass fields in front of the Hiroshima Peace Museum, the “Cut Grass Piece” aimed at helping me and the audience make sense of the huge number of casualties of the Second World War. When one person dies, we are able to grieve and make sense of it; 10 deaths is quite mind-boggling; but when millions die, there is no way for us to make sense of such massive numbers, and they are reduced to just that... numbers. So, by performing an action in which I tried to make every death count, I hoped to bring perspective to this unspeakable tragedy.

This performance was also a response to what I feel is a “victim mentality” that Japan seems to possess in regard to the incidents of the Second World War. By presenting the numbers of Japanese killed (3,238,000), and the number of those killed by the Japanese Imperial army (23,877,000), I hoped to present some kind of perspective to this victim-aggressor relationship.

I began by setting up a signboard stating my intentions and the statistics about the Second World War deaths. I cut a blade of grass, and kept a count as

I cut more and more, in commemoration of every death caused by the Second World War. The blades of grass I cut were kept in ziplock bags. Steps 2 and 3 were repeated again and again.

If I were to do this alone, It would take me 207 years to complete working for two hours every day. Therefore, I invited others to contribute to this performance through the project website, www.cutgrasspiece.tumblr.com and other social media sites. This way, I hoped that it would proliferate into a worldwide movement to commemorate and to better understand the Second World War. I intended to continue this performance until 71,021,650 blades have been cut, collectively.

Conclusions

I ended the project with an exhibition entitled “State Of Doubt: Seven Actions Towards Dilemma”, which was co-curated by Emma Ota and Sakiko Yamaoka, with whom I had previously collaborated. At this exhibition I displayed the documentation, methodology, and intention of each of the seven works I had carried out in Japan. Audiences were encouraged to offer critique and feedback.

In the discussions that led to the exhibition, Ota, Yamaoka and myself disputed the title and we all questioned whether the word “action” or “performance” was more appropriate. I eventually settled on the word “action”, as I felt that action carries with it a sense of responsibility and that was how I felt about what I had done with my audiences. Actions have consequences; I was accountable to those I had engaged. While what I had done could be classified as a performance, I begged to differ. A “performance” ends when the performance is over. Performance allows the performer to enter and exit a character. Unfortunately I did not have that luxury. The word “action”, on the other hand, insists that the performer remains as he is when he performs.

However, I also would like to bring the concept of “performance” to a different level. Many who had known my works in the past expressed shock when they learned about the nature of this project.

In the past (and now), most of my work has leaned towards lampooning and parodying issues, be they personal, social, or political, often with comedic and humorous effects. Those who knew me all echoed the same thought; “Why so serious?” when I explained my project. Perhaps, in Japan, I myself entered a different character or persona. Maybe my entire 10 months in Japan was one big “performance”, and each of the performances I carried out were, in fact, performances within a performance.

Emma Ota in her essay “Called to The Table”, written for the exhibition flyer wrote:

“While aiming to hold us all account for our actions, our past, our values, he cannot escape his own responsibility as an artist, and he himself must be held account for his seven actions. The privileged position of the artist to question the world around them has no standing if we do not in turn question the artist back”.

Then, is art an appropriate tool to tackle this subject matter? Or am I, an artist, the right person to deal with this subject matter given its weight, and because it requires specialist knowledge of history, sociology, law, and international relations? I feel inadequate.

Considering the discreet, private, and non-confrontational nature of Japanese society, I also feel that performance art work in public spaces is not an appropriate medium to deal with something as heavy as the subject matter. Especially not when the subject matter is considered taboo and is rarely talked about even in private.

However, the dialog must not stop. Many who attended my exhibition agreed that Japan cannot continue to live with this amnesia of its past history. Kenzaburo Oe in his essay *Denying History Disables Japan* writes, “For the Japanese to be able to regard 21st century, Asia not as a new economic power rivaling the West but as a region in which Japan can be a true partner, they must first establish a basis that would enable them to criticize their neighbors and be criticized in turn. For this, Japan must apologize for its aggression and offer compensation”.

To do this, Japan has a very small period of opportunity. The comfort women, the survivors of Nanking, and everyone else who suffered under Japanese aggression are all slowly dying, one by one. Japan must stop denying its past and begin compensating and apologizing for what it has done, or it will forever be held guilty for its actions (or in this case, inaction). A prosperous and peaceful Asia cannot exist as long as Asia feels like Japan is indebted to it, and Japan thinks it owes Asia nothing, and continues to tell its own people that it was instead, doing Asia a favor.

As a performance artist, I do not think that I am able to effect this change. However I do hope that I have played my part in this process, albeit it being a slow and arduous one, in bringing true peace, forgiveness, and understanding within the Asian region.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dower, John W. 1985. War, Peace, & Beauty. In *The Hiroshima Panels: The Art of Iri & Toshi Maruki*, ed. John Junkerman. Kodansha International.

Metraux, Daniel A. 2009. Japan's Historical Myopia. In *Japanese War Crimes*, ed. Peter Li. Transaction Publishers.

Ramlah Binti Adam, Abdul Hakim Bin Samuri & Muslimin Bin Fadzil, 2010. *Sejarah Tingkatan 3*. Dewan Pustaka Negara & Ministry of Education, Malaysia.