

Resonance across islands in Asia: Okinawan Action and Art

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On July 17, 2021, “Resonance across islands in Asia: Okinawan Action and Art”, the final program of the 2021 Jejak-Tabi Exchange: Wandering Contemporary Asian Performance (JTE), took place via Zoom from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. (PHT).

Launched in 2017, JTE has since traveled to various cities in Asia with the aim of helping artists and cultural workers intimately grasp each region’s cultural, linguistic, social, and political context vis-à-vis the performing arts. JTE emphasizes close contact and slow trips so that practitioners may better absorb localities—a pertinent endeavor amidst the rapid development of cities in Asia, to which we can attribute the increasing proliferation of art festivals and fairs in the region.

The recently concluded edition of JTE was initially scheduled to take place in the third quarter of last year in Naha, but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The travel restrictions brought about by the ongoing crisis made JTE’s mission of providing a platform for intimate knowledge-sharing unfeasible. Despite this, the organizers were able to work around such challenges.

As “Contact/Zone”—the theme for JTE 2021—refers to an imagined, constantly mobile place between fixed points where boundaries are negotiated, JTE 2021 invited Okinawan artists and cultural workers to discuss their creative process and social contexts and to engage with the arts communities in the three Southeast Asian cities where JTE had taken place before: Yogyakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Manila (replacing Roxas City, the host of the first half of the 2020 edition).

For “Resonance across islands in Asia”, audiences physically gathered at three sites—Green Papaya Art Projects in Quezon City and Destiny City Church and Ang Panublion Museum both in Roxas City—and tuned in to the online conference.

The program consisted of two curator’s talks, both of which were followed by discussions moderated by Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez with Vim Nadera as the discussant. The two sessions explored the oeuvres of Chikako Yamashiro and Mao Ishikawa, two Okinawan artists who have solo survey exhibitions. Throughout the talks and discussions, English translations—simultaneous and consecutive interpretations—were provided by Art Translators Collective.

After JTE co-founder and curator Akane Nakamura’s introduction, wherein she discussed the uneasy relationship between Okinawa and Japan, the first session titled *Chikako Yamashiro: Boundless Imagination* commenced.

Chikako Yamashiro: Boundless Imagination

The aim for this talk was to “consider the potential of imagination that reverberates beyond regions” through the videos and performances of Chikako Yamashiro which “evoke a wealth of images through narratives and physical movements, confronting current struggles that residents of Okinawa face along with the area’s history, memory, and legacy.”

Giving the talk was Keiko Okamura, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo (MOT) and the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum (TOP). As curator at the TOP, her final exhibition is the ongoing “Reframing the Land/mind/body-scape” (2021), Yamashiro’s first solo survey show in a public institution. The exhibition features Yamashiro’s early video performances up to her recent work.

Okamura briefly discussed Yamashiro’s biography and education, which she contextualized historically by mentioning how Okinawa was returned by the US to Japan in 1972, four years before Yamashiro was born. She says that in the succeeding years, the aftermath of US control is still felt in the area and it permeates Yamashiro’s works.

Okamura proceeded to discuss Yamashiro’s oeuvre which she had categorized thematically. The first work she discussed was *BORDER* (2002)—a video showing Yamashiro walking along the fences which demarcated US from Okinawan territory—before talking about *Okinawa Tourist: I Like Okinawa Sweet* (2004) and *Okinawa Graveyard Club* (2004)—videos which respectively show the artist licking ice cream near a military base and dancing in a graveyard—which Okamura situated under the heading “Site/Landscape x Body/Performance”.

The following section in Okamura’s presentation, “How to inherit the lives of others”, contained a single work: *Your Voice Came Out Through My Throat* (2009). In it, Yamashiro more directly addresses the trauma of war by interviewing a man who, as a child, witnessed a close relative commit suicide as World War II was raging on the island of Saipan. Yamashiro superimposed a video of this interview on another video of her lip-syncing to it, as though to take in the man’s voice and to ponder on the possibility (or impossibility) of truly inheriting another person’s memories.

The following category was “The personification of landscapes” which was comprised of works like *The Body of Condonement* (2012), *Chorus of the Melody* (2010), *Seaweed Woman* (2008), and *Mud Man* (2016), in which Yamashiro blurs the boundary between landscapes and humans—as bodies and/or subjects—through photographic and performative strategies.

Lastly, Okamura spoke about *Reframing* (2021), a video installation (from which Yamashiro’s ongoing solo survey exhibition derived its title) that shows the Okinawan landscape undergoing desertification as a result of land reclamation and mining projects.

During the discussion, Legaspi-Ramirez started by expressing how she reacted strongly to the works Okamura described under “How to inherit the lives of others” and “The personification of landscapes”. She then pointed out the “definite parallels” between the

experience of living in the Philippines and what Yamashiro's works invoke, how her works portray "bodies in very charged expanses." Other parallels Legaspi-Ramirez noticed were the postwar colonial anxieties that Filipinos share with Okinawans and the ongoing encroachment in natural resources.

She also found Okamura's statement regarding the lens or perspective that Yamashiro's body takes in her performance films very striking and it is as though the land and sea appear to look or talk back through the positioning of the artist's body. Moreover, Legaspi-Ramirez thought that, since we are in the midst of a pandemic, it was pertinent to point out how Yamashiro's works invoke the idea or problem of humans occupying and emptying lands, intruding and treading into the sea, and displacing other beings.

Legaspi-Ramirez posed two questions: first, it seems that Yamashiro finds it important to keep the experience of encountering her works very sensate but, given the current situation wherein we are forced to meet our public through screens and other very mediated means, how will Yamashiro's practice address these changes? Second, considering Yamashiro's inclination to make things subtle and not so easy to read, how does her approach play against a mediascape which basically prefers what is digestible and easy to understand?

Okamura responded to the first question by affirming that the sensate experience is indeed important to Yamashiro's work, and although her work is very visual, it is also worth noting that Yamashiro stimulates other senses through elements like sound and words. Okamura also pointed out that despite Yamashiro's works possessing a certain "live-ness," it is already mediated since we are seeing an actual performance as recorded through video.

Although Okamura acknowledged that experiencing Yamashiro's work in person is the most ideal scenario and that viewing Yamashiro's work on a smartphone would only capture a fraction of that experience, she nonetheless recognizes the benefits of such a mode of engagement. Having viewed Yamashiro's works through her computer many times in preparation for "Reframing the Land/mind/body-scape", Okamura noticed that the sheer physical experience of engaging with Yamashiro's work in person might be overwhelming. But after having viewed it repeatedly on her computer, she felt that a deeper analysis where she was able to read, critique, or think with the works became possible. As such, Okamura thinks that virtual or online platforms like the 2021 edition of JTE possess great potential in allowing us to deepen our understanding of certain topics without gathering in the same physical location.

With regards to the second question, Okamura expressed how she often grapples with that issue whenever she views Yamashiro's work because there exists in it a dichotomy between Yamashiro's more literary or abstract expressions and the more pertinent social issues she addresses which are typically expressed in a direct and succinct manner. Okamura mentioned how there are issues specific to Okinawa, like land reclamation and mining development, present in Yamashiro's work that are not immediately accessible to audiences from other areas like Tokyo. Okamura acknowledged that although introducing these specific ideas to an audience from other contexts in a more direct manner might be more effective, she

thinks that abstraction does not necessarily weaken a message, rather it can enable different readings. She cited *Mud Man* and how it incorporates poetry not just from Okinawa but from Jeju Island as well. Since these poems do not specifically reference the Henoko military base in Okinawa, Okamura observed that the audience was able to receive the context on a deeper level.

Okamura added that she personally knows that Yamashiro has felt guilt over how she is not directly involved in activism but, at the same time, Okamura thinks that Yamashiro believes that, as an artist, rather than to participate in every protest, her role is to contribute works to the larger context of art and social issues.

Following technical difficulties, and while Vim Nadera was preparing for his response, Norberto “Peewee” Roldan addressed to Okamura a question on whether the political element in Yamashiro’s practice was predetermined or incidental in the artist’s conception of her works.

Okamura responded that she believes all art is inherently political. She said that there are two aspects in Yamashiro’s approach: her personal experiences of feeling repressed and oppressed (and her wanting to deepen her understanding of that familiar feeling) and the greater context of Okinawa and the issues specific to the area. Okamura said that these two aspects are not distinct in Yamashiro’s work, rather the two are merged. Instead of first deciding to make a “political work” before looking for a subject, Yamashiro aims to understand issues that profoundly impact both her as an individual as well as a broader social community.

This exchange was followed by a brief presentation from Nadera. He began by saying that the panel reminded him of Rosalie Zerrudo and Dennis Gupa’s research paper “Inday Dolls: Body Monologues and Lullabies for Freedom in Prison; Scripting Possible Futures in Justice Art in Iloilo’s Correctional System” (2020), before reciting a few sentences from the paper’s abstract.

Nadera expressed how Yamashiro’s works like *Chinbin Western, Representation of the Family* (2019) addresses “the subject of identity, border between life and death, [and] metabolism of historical memory”; *The Beginning of Creation, Abduction, A child* (2015) explores the “reconciliation between nature and human, and self and the other through poetic image and narrative”; *Sinking Voices, Red Breath* (2010) “[fuses] the border between reality and imagination as well as [generates] multiple meanings between the image and the audience”; and how *OKINAWA TOURIST* (2004) and *Mud Man* “[recycle] found footage employing voice performance and [use] multi-channel screens.”

Inspired by Yamashiro’s practice, Nadera shared a poem he wrote in Tagalog (with an English translation shared on his screen) based on the artist’s works. After reciting his poem, Nadera shared a performance involving a veiled container from which he extracted various items like ribbons, flowers, and necklaces before revealing that the container was a box in the style of Darth Vader’s head. He then dressed it with a face shield, covered its eyes with a red face mask, and held out a plush toy in the shape of a heart with arms.

Following Nadera's brief presentation and performance, Okamura further explained how Yamashiro does not create works on a logical basis, but mostly thinks through the poetic and the abstract. According to Okamura, Yamashiro produces works from a political context but gets inspired by various things like places, people, encounters, and experiences and, willingly or not, tries to search for the meaning of her work in the process of making it. As such, Okamura described Yamashiro's works as a "ripple of her imagination" which allow many mental associations to be made. Moreover, Yamashiro remains critically engaged with her own work, constantly questioning her own perspective and process, and is always open to new interpretations and directions. For Okamura, this aspect gives Yamashiro's work a long lifespan because they are able to continually evolve.

Legaspi-Ramirez proceeded to read an audience member's question regarding how a link between different bodies from very different locations and contexts can be created if we were to understand Yamashiro's works as performances which embody the controversies of her location.

Okamura answered that she believes that Yamashiro's work, like great art, has the ability to transcend borders and time. She narrated an anecdote from Yamashiro about how her work had strongly resonated with a Greek audience member when it was shown in Germany. Okamura attributed this quality to the delicate balance between some level of abstraction and a commitment to a specific subject.

Wanting to learn more about "the plight of Okinawans" in more concrete terms, another audience member asked whether Yamashiro has cited in her work specific instances where she had personally experienced oppression or if she approaches the subject of oppression in a more general sense.

Okamura replied that the fact that people who are not from Okinawa are able to take interest in the issues Okinawans face through Yamashiro's work is very important. Okamura clarified that although she cannot speak for Okinawans and their current situation, she does not want to leave the audience with the impression that all Okinawans are constantly struggling and suffering from the specific situation discussed earlier. Instead, Okamura wanted to convey that the reality is much more complex and multilayered, and there is so much more to the lives of Okinawans. Okamura explained that Yamashiro, having gained more experience over the years, has realized the difficulty of expressing the complexity of the situation in Okinawa and that Okinawans cannot be positioned simply as victims of imperialism or colonialism. Regarding Yamashiro's personal experiences of oppression, Okamura expressed uncertainty but she said that Yamashiro has not directly addressed such in her recent work.

Mao Ishikawa: Human Empathy and Its Questions

After an hour-long lunch break, the program resumed at around 1:00 p.m. (PHT) with *Mao Ishikawa: Human Empathy and Its Questions*, a talk which focused on Mao Ishikawa's photography and how it highlights the lives of Okinawa's residents, the sense of humanity apparent in her work, and the artistic expressions and issues that arise from the shared experiences of people from Okinawa, the Philippines, and Southeast Asia.

The panel commenced following a brief introduction from Masashi Nomura, one of the curators of JTE 2021, during which he discussed how the basic principle behind the current edition of JTE was to look at Okinawa not as a region of Japan but as an individual place that shares elements with various Asian regions.

The speaker was Fumiaki Kamegai from the Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum. Kamegai was also curator of the exhibition "Mao Ishikawa: Bad Ass and Beauty – One Love" (2021), an overview exhibition which spanned 47 years of Ishikawa's photography and featured 15 different series of hers.

After briefly discussing Ishikawa's biography and her *Akabanaa (Red Flower)* (1975—7) series which follows US soldiers enjoying the nightlife scene in the towns of Koza and Kin, Kamegai focused on Ishikawa's *Philippine Dancers* (1988—9), a series which he thought was very important to discuss since it contains a number of photographs taken in the Philippines.

Ishikawa's *Philippine Dancers* was shot in the Okinawan town of Kin and in various locations in the Philippines. Kin, Kamegai explained, is a town with a US military base and that there were a lot of bars right across the base's entrance. Kamegai narrated how, in the summer of 1988, for the first time in 11 years, Ishikawa returned to a bar in Kin where she used to work only to discover that all of the girls who worked there had been replaced by Filipino dancers. Ishikawa befriended and photographed them both at work and in their private lives, even following them to their hometowns of Baguio, Manila, and Olongapo (which Kamegai later pointed out is also the site of one of the biggest US military bases in Asia). Kamegai identified two things characteristic of Ishikawa's photography present in the series: people both at work and in their private lives and people from completely different contexts in one image (as illustrated by a photograph of American soldiers together with Filipino dancers, an image which Kamegai found very representative of Okinawa at the time).

Another series Kamegai discussed was Ishikawa's newest series, *The Great Ryukyu Photo Scroll* (2014—present). For *The Great Ryukyu Photo Scroll*, Ishikawa decides on certain historical moments to restage and photograph and invites people to play the characters in these scenes. The series features moments and references familiar to Okinawans, like traffic accidents committed by American soldiers from 1945 to 1972 or when parts of a US military helicopter fell on a kindergarten playground in 2017. Kamegai said that the ongoing series is very much a collaborative project because Ishikawa gives the subjects some creative freedom in how they would like to reinterpret their roles. Kamegai ended his presentation by articulating how he thinks that the *Philippine Dancers* series shares this quality since Ishikawa stayed close to her subjects in order to get closer to the essence of the issues they were facing.

Legaspi-Ramirez kicked off the discussion by pointing out that certain questions pertaining to authenticity and accountability from the previous talk also seem relevant in this session.

Wanting to focus on the *Philippine Dancers* series—which she found to be very humanizing—Legaspi-Ramirez brought up that she read somewhere that Ishikawa questioned why some people have issues with storytellers being part of the story being told. This, for Legaspi-Ramirez, displays a strong sense of reflexivity on Ishikawa's part. Since the session was subtitled "Empathy and Its Questions", Legaspi-Ramirez asked more regarding Ishikawa's embeddedness and how she is invested in developing relationships with her subjects. In particular, Legaspi-Ramirez wanted to know if Ishikawa continues to have a relationship with the Filipino dancers, and if there were times that Ishikawa's subjects talked back at her or tried to re-figure how they were being represented.

Kamegai answered that, regarding the *Philippine Dancers* series, Ishikawa has not stayed in touch with her subjects. However, with her other series, it is not uncommon for her to revisit the relationships she had built while shooting a previous series and to invite the same people for another project. Kamegai cited as an example how subjects from Ishikawa's *Henoko* (1997) series reappear in *The Great Ryukyu Photo Scroll*. Overall, Ishikawa keeps in touch with her subjects.

In relation to Legaspi-Ramirez's second question, Kamegai said that what makes Ishikawa unique is that, when she is studying a divisive issue like the controversial Henoko military base, she would always interview and photograph people from both sides of the debate and includes quotes from her subjects in the captions of the photographs. As such, Ishikawa lets the viewers form their own opinion. Although Ishikawa has her own personal stance (for example, she is personally against the Henoko military base), she thinks that if we do not talk to people with views opposed to ours, we will never get to the essence of a problem.

Legaspi-Ramirez followed up her questions by asking if the subjects in *The Great Ryukyu Scroll* project, where Ishikawa asks citizens to participate in creating a people's history, had felt some degree of empowerment in being able to tell a story that is different from the official narrative.

Kamegai responded by first elaborating on the details of the project: starting in 2014, Ishikawa shoots and prints photographs on 20 to 30 fabrics, each spanning several meters long, which she showcases every year.

During an interview with Ishikawa for her recent retrospective exhibition, she told Kamegai that she conducts interviews as part of her process. It is during such interviews that she would tell the subjects about the scene she wants to reenact and photograph and how she wants to execute it. But throughout the shooting process, her subjects would ad lib and do their own thing. This is something that Ishikawa, as a photographer, occasionally finds a lot more

interesting because the images show what the subjects are like as people based on the expressions they have when they are doing what they want to do. Although there might be some cases where it becomes excessive and Ishikawa would opt for what she had originally planned, there are also times when the subjects exceed her own imagination and create something much more interesting than what she had planned so she decides to go along with it.

During these pre- and post-shoot interviews, Ishikawa would also ask her subjects about their work, their personal lives, and what they want to express through photography. She would also include portions of what her subjects said in the captions of the photographs. This informational dimension, according to Kamegai, is a major part of what we experience through Ishikawa's photography. Kamegai also said that Ishikawa claimed that she is not trying to get to know people for photography's sake, rather she considers the whole process of getting to know people as photography, something which Kamegai thinks captures the essence of her work.

Following this, Nadera began his brief presentation by placing a bulul figure—with a rope around its neck, waist, and ankles—in front of his camera. He spoke about colonization and, in particular, how the Philippines was colonized by Spain and the US. He discussed how the Philippines remain semi-colonial through American imperialism, as partly manifested by the continued presence of the Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base, the annual military exercises called Balikatan, and the special treatment and eventual pardon granted to US Marine Joseph Scott Pemberton who was convicted of killing Filipina trans woman Jennifer Laude in 2014.

He continued by describing several waves of Filipino migration: the first was around 1417 onwards, the second was around the early 1900s, the third was around WWII, and the fourth was during the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos who used human capital for export, something that Ishikawa captured in her photography.

Nadera proceeded with his performance by attaching Spanish and Philippine flags on the bulul and arranging various objects around it like a Spiderman figurine and a toy koala bear, while a YouTube video of the Philippine national anthem—directed and animated by Arnold Arre and performed by Radioactive Sago Project—was playing. Unfortunately, due to technical difficulties, the video played with no sound.

Kamegai thanked Nadera for his informative presentation before adding that areas like Subic, Olongapo, and other cities with US military bases, like Kin town, tend to gain a similar scenery over time, hence why he decided to show earlier in his presentation what Kin looks like through Google Street View. Kamegai also brought up a brief anecdote on how, during the American occupation of Okinawa, car registration plates would have “Keystone of the Pacific” printed on them, a term which Kamegai finds to be precisely indicative of how the US saw Okinawa at the time.

Kamegai added that another thing that makes Ishikawa's perspective unique is that while it is quite obvious that she is critical of military rule, her inclination to photograph individual soldiers rather than portray the US military itself is noteworthy. For example, she photographed

African-Americans, most of whom come from low-income families, who had joined the military as it was one of the few viable sources of income presented to them only to return to a hostile and racist environment after their service. For Ishikawa, looking at the individual soldiers shows to us that the concept of the US and its military is much more complex.

Bringing up what Nadera said earlier about the different waves of migration, Kamegai said that although the subjects in the *Philippine Dancers* series were part of the fourth wave, through Ishikawa's photographs, we are able to see past that and have a closer view on how these individual women live their lives, how they live back home in the Philippines, and who they are as human beings.

Lastly, Kamegai brought up how whenever Ishikawa has lectures, she would begin by declaring that she is Okinawan and not Japanese. Kamegai described this as her way of provoking the audience in order to ask them what their opinion is on the matter. Similarly, we can witness in Ishikawa's photography how she is always provoking and challenging her subjects and audience, who all come from different positions and have different perspectives, to develop their own opinion.

Legaspi-Ramirez continued by reading aloud a question from The Japan Foundation Director Ben Suzuki regarding the anti-American sentiment and critical spirit toward the Japanese government that Okinawan artists have expressed. Suzuki wanted to know if there are examples of works done by Filipino artists that could be compared to such.

Nadera responded by taping the bulul's mouth shut with a post-vaccination Band-Aid. Roldan followed by sharing his screen to show Antipas Delotavo's *Itak sa Pusong ni Mang Juan (Dagger in Old Juan's Heart)* (1978), an iconic painting depicting the Filipino everyman whose chest is almost pierced by a dagger-like descender in Coca-Cola's logo.

An audience member asked how art, artists, and cultural workers figure into the process of national healing from colonial pasts and if it is even possible given the power relations and outward forces that directly and indirectly affect how one navigates the entire art system.

Kamegai answered that we are always forced into a position where we have to choose one side or the other: Japanese or Okinawan, for or against the military base, etc. Kamegai said that one thing we can learn from Ishikawa's approach is how she provokes both sides and asks us of our own opinion, not yes or no answers. Ishikawa looks for more intricate answers that do not fall neatly under the two conflicting positions, and she is actually trying to look at the whole spectrum and all of the positions in between the two diametrically opposed sides. As such, in Ishikawa's photography, there is a constant dialogue between the artist, her subjects, and the audience, and Kamegai proposed that we can search for new answers from this dialogue.

Three questions were raised by members of the Roxas City audience, which Roldan pointed out was the same crowd that attended the 2020 edition of JTE: how did Ishikawa find inspiration in the Filipino dancers in Kin and what made her decide to visit the Filipino dancers'

hometowns; did Ishikawa find any similarities between US military-occupied sites in Okinawa and the Philippines in terms of their struggles; and does Ishikawa plan on exhibiting her photo series in the Philippines anytime in the near future.

For the first question, Kamegai repeated that Ishikawa was in the same line of work as her subjects years prior to starting *Philippine Dancers* and that she visited the bar in Kin where she used to work at. Upon finding out that all of the Japanese girls had been replaced by Filipinos, she told the Filipino dancers that she used to work there and began to befriend them. On why she followed them to the Philippines, two of the girls she befriended had to return to the Philippines to renew their visas and so Ishikawa asked if she could tag along and photograph them in their hometowns. For the third question, Kamegai expressed his and Ishikawa's hope that they could exhibit the *Philippine Dancers* series in the Philippines sometime in the near future.

Legaspi-Ramirez returned to her question on whether Ishikawa had been able to maintain a relationship with the dancers. She said that she raised it because she thinks that photographers cannot escape from the question of representation since photography essentially takes a slice of life and excludes other possible representations—in the case of *Philippine Dancers*, it shows Filipinos in the entertainment scene rather than Filipinos in less stigmatized occupations.

Kamegai agreed that the problem of representation is extremely important and that photography inevitably creates a certain image which then recreates itself. He stated that Ishikawa herself has faced this problem and she is very much aware of this. One thing Kamegai found worth noting is that Ishikawa herself has experienced being in the same line of work as the subjects in *Philippine Dancers* and so she probably felt that she was in no position to stigmatize the dancers because they too must have their good reasons for choosing that work.

Kamegai then narrated how, in the early '80s, Ishikawa followed and photographed a group of hard drinking harbor workers for her series *A Port Town Elegy*. When she pointed her camera to one of these men, the man told her, "We have our own life too, y'know." This left a strong impression on Ishikawa and this was a crucial moment of reckoning for her where she realized how vitally important it is to have respect for her subjects.