

Cancer: A Metaphoric Re/Vision: Aiko Suzuki's Bombard/Invade/Radiate

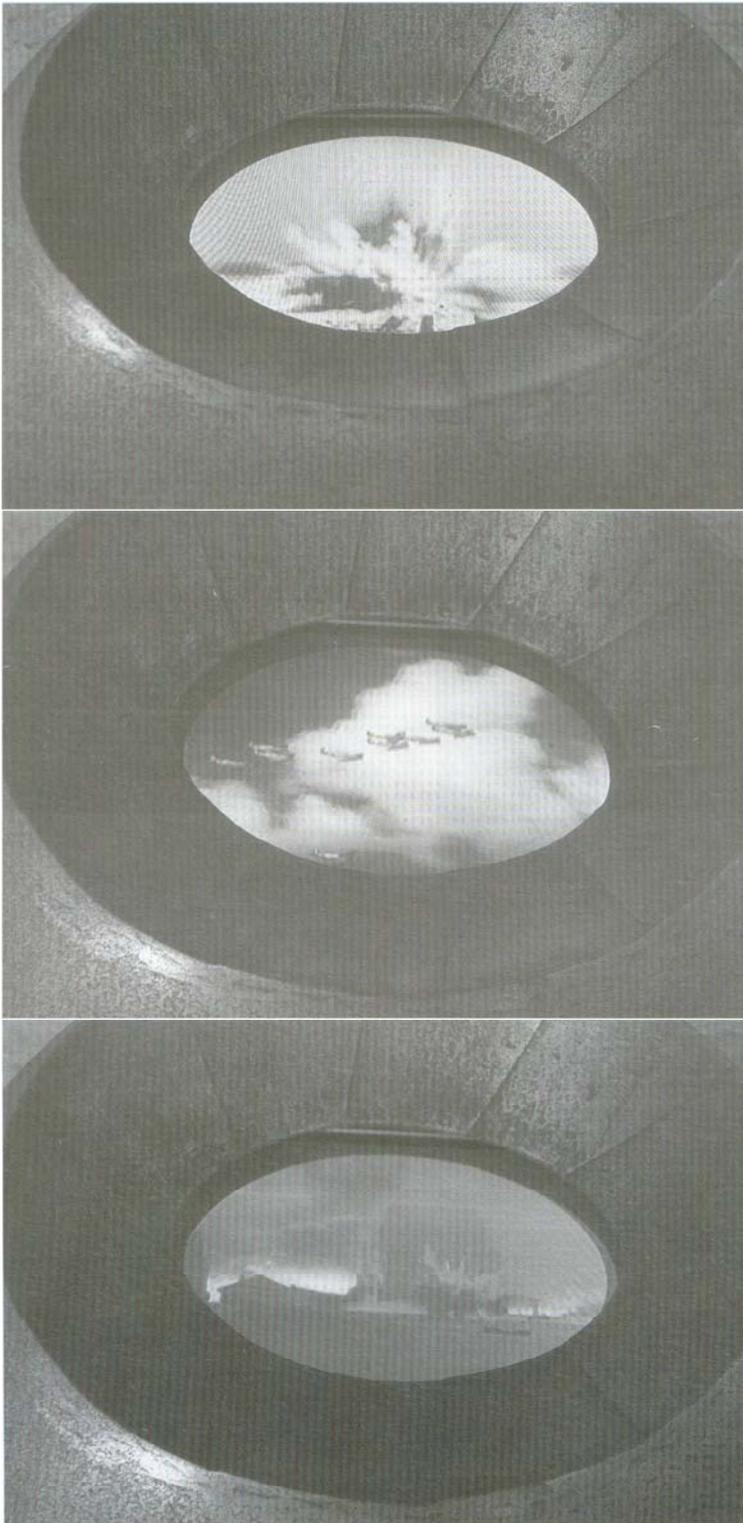
A Space Gallery
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review by Pam Patterson



Cancer, an illness experienced as a ruthless secret invasion, is the most radical of disease metaphors,¹ argues Susan Sontag. The "interest in the metaphor is precisely that it refers to a disease so overlaid with mystification, so charged with the fantasy of inescapable fatality,"² In treatment, the war metaphor becomes active. As Sontag suggests, radiotherapy is as aerial warfare as patients are "bombarded" with toxic rays; chemotherapy is chemical warfare.³ For those of us who engage with the disease, we live, crushed under the weight of its metaphor. We hear "cancer" used to represent a culture run amuck. We experience our bodies undergoing cancer treatment as under attack. We are metaphorically traced as we are slashed, burned and poisoned.

Aiko Suzuki was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer in 2002. I was diagnosed in 2004 with Stage 2 breast cancer. She has had two more years of negotiating "cancer" in all of its opacity and the stigma inherent in its classification. And Suzuki, unlike me, lives truly on the edge: the disease is systemic, its presence and progression marked, assessed, judged, barely checked. As a breast cancer patient, she resists naming herself a "survivor"; as an artist, she challenges the limitations of language to adequately express her experience.

Aiko Suzuki, *Signings*, video installation, 2005, photo: Midi Onodera and Yosh Inouye, Courtesy: A Space



In the medicalized, militarized language of cancer, meaning is distorted and reduced. Suzuki, like others, has been incised in surgery, bombarded with radiation, her cells subjected to toxic chemicals. As treatment, aimed to kill the cancer cells without killing (it is hoped) the patient, it employs the strategic hit.

Suzuki walks this battleground, gathering her experiences with cancer, in hospitals, within her community. She uses her aesthetic skills as an artist to answer Sontag's call to elucidate the cancer metaphor, moving us toward a liberation from its weight and meaning.

Bombard/Invade/Radiate is a multi-layered intimate exhibition in which whispers draw us in, invite us to come inside the cancer metaphor to where it is lived. Suzuki gives the stuff of dreams - in this case, nightmares - an earthly substance, rooting images in video installation and projection, sculpture, sound, and through the manipulation of light, dark and moving colour. Each element blends, not to give a generalized impression but to cross and connect, forming moments of startling clarity. Each in its particularity deflates the cancer metaphor, reforming the language, subverting it from militaristic caricature to (in)tense reality.

Composed of three elements - wall-mounted listening posts, a video/sound sculpture and hanging panels that act as a surface for video projections - the exhibit builds an intimacy that is both shocking and seductive.

On entering the exhibition, we approach the listening posts as though they are the locked patient examination room doors at the Princess Margaret Hospital Breast Clinic. In the hospital, these doors all look the same. When we leave the room for a moment to return, we are momentarily confused as to which door is which. So, we listen at the cracks knowing the silent one is ours.

Aiko Suzuki, *Witness*, video installation, 2005, photo: Midi Onodera and Yosh Inouye, Courtesy: A Space

Behind these doors, as at these posts, the doctor speaks. Here we are told how advanced our disease is, explained our treatment choices. In the exhibit, we press our faces to the cracks, set at different levels of each post, and strain to hear. The tape is of the calm, authoritative voice of the oncologist, speaking, we assume, to Aiko. He describes his chemotherapeutic weapon of choice and its action – its efficacy as the bomb, the hit, the kill. It is unnerving. His description is lyrical; images are framed eloquently. Its intent, while clear, is enveloped and softened by a language of symbol. In this softening, the reality of "treatment" is diffused and distorted.

But Suzuki does not let that rest. In making the text barely audible and disembodied, she encourages us to move even closer. We listen and see others listen with great intensity. We are caught and mesmerized by what we hear.

A video monitor set face-up sits encased in a rusted bomb shell, WWII footage of bombs being released from American fighter planes soundlessly plays in a loop.' Every few seconds, a droplet of water falls onto the screen's surface, causing ripples that momentarily diffuse the images. The surface bends but does not break and the planes continue their mission: bombs drop and explode. The text, "witness," flashes on the screen, hovers and then disappears. As someone who grew up in the 50s and 60s, I cannot help but recall

Hiroshima, the past as haunting. The ghosts of nuclear war were irrevocably stamped as images on our psyche. Tears, mutability, timelessness – together these elements

make the installation so compelling. It is as oracle recalling the past, foretelling the future, calling us to make an account.

In three large-scale video projections, Suzuki stands mute at the edge of a distant seashore waving yellow and red coloured flags, signaling in semaphore the word: bombard, invade, radiate. In different stages of undress, she both adds and peels away the layers of obfuscation revealing the woman beneath, the scarred chest – silent and eloquent. We experience this as in bits of broken message. As at the listening posts, we need to strain, to see and to understand. Semaphore language is not commonly known. We catch visual snatches on the edge of our imagination: a dove flutters past, the waves brush the shore. We experience the futility and frustration. She speaks, but for many of us her words are indecipherable.

Suzuki clearly excels at manipulating symbolic language. She uses it to reframe, recontextualize and rearticulate, to disabuse us of its original intent. Nowhere is she didactic. The invitation to rethink is posed through the waiting, prescient stillness.

She names us as witnesses and makes us implicated and complicit within the metaphoric space. But, we do not wander forlorn. Like Bosch's garden, this one's delights are sensual and seductive, and on closer examination, brutal and mutilating. But there is intent here, and the closer we move, the more we listen and wait, the clearer it becomes.

The energy of Suzuki's work is found in her determination to force changes to occur and thus confront choices. In *Bombard/Invade/Radiate* she does just that. Suzuki takes us deep into the contemplation of both her life and death, and our own. For those of us who live with cancer, such a consideration is not unusual. But what of those who say, "Not me!" Her installation seems to speak, quietly with power and resonance, "You are not uninvolved. Go beyond complacency or fear. Look beyond the metaphor. Diffuse its potency."

Pam Patterson (PhD) has been active in various arts communities for thirty years. Her research is energized by her personal politics and focused on embodiment in art practice and disability issues with publications Studies in Art Education, Resources for Feminist Research, Parachute and Matriarts. She is visiting scholar at the Centre for Women's Studies, OISE/UT and performs/lectures for various colleges and universities. As a performance and visual artist, she has exhibited and performed 5010, and with Leena Raudvee in ARTIFACTS.

Notes:

1. Susan Sontag. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador. 1977/78 and 1988/89).
2. *Ibid.* p. 87.
3. *Ibid.* p. 65.
4. Videos were made in collaboration with Midi Onodera. The soundwork that reverberates through the space was composed by Chiyoko Szlavnic, co-artistic director of the experimental ensemble Berlin Swischentone.