

# On Uranium Art: Artist Ken + Julia Yonetani in Conversation with Asato Ikeda ウラン・アートについて—アーティスト・ケンとジュリア・ヨネタニに池田安里が聞く

Asato Ikeda

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*Article summary: In this interview, Asato Ikeda speaks with artists Ken and Julia Yonetani, the creators of uranium art. The Yonetanis share with us emotions that have motivated them to create the uranium art and their interests in Aboriginal stories and worldviews, and in post-war Japanese cultural images of nuclear power and catastrophe.*



Ken and Julia Yonetani are Australian artists who produce sculpture, installation, video, and performance. Born and raised in Japan, the two artists have unique professional careers. Ken worked in the Foreign Currency Exchange Tokyo for three years, received training in sculpture and ceramics, and then became an assistant to pottery master Toshio Kinjo, the eldest son of Jiro Kinjo, National Living Treasure of Japan.<sup>1</sup> He subsequently finished his MA and PhD degrees in Visual Arts at Australian National University and Sydney College of the Arts, respectively. His work *Sweet Barrier Reef*, a sculpture made of sugar, which addresses the damage the sugarcane

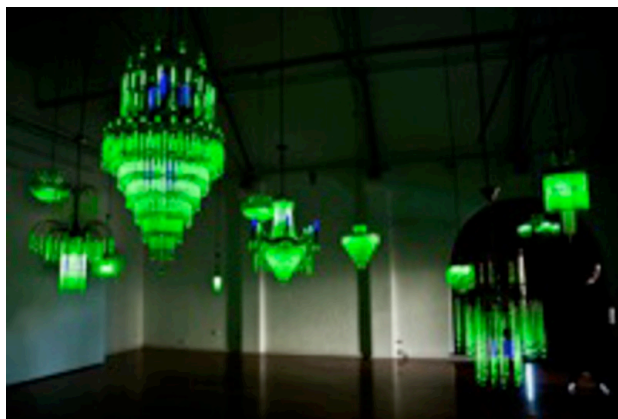
industry is causing to the Great Barrier Reef, represented Australia at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. Julia completed her MA and PhD in History at the University of Tokyo and Australian National University, and published scholarly articles on contested war memories in Okinawa in major journals, including *Critical Asian Studies*. They have received major grants, including from the Australia Council for the Arts and the Japan Foundation, and spent time as artists-in-residence in Finland and Portugal.

Ken and Julia work collaboratively, rather like Japanese painters Maruki Iri and Toshi, who produced the *Hiroshima Panels*. They usually start their productions with a brainstorming session, and they say that they have never had problems working together. Ken explains, “We exchange opinions before making something, but the opinions are always very close.”<sup>2</sup> One performance was inspired by another famous artist couple, Yoko Ono and John Lennon: in 2009 and 2010, Ken and Julia staged a bed-in titled *GLOBAL WARMING IS OVER! (If you want it)*, quoting Ono and Lennon’s *War is Over! (If you want it)*, which took place in Montreal in 1969. Ken and Julia’s art has consistently addressed environmental issues. In addition to *Sweet Barrier Reef* and *GLOBAL WARMING IS OVER!*, they made a salt sculpture out of groundwater salt from the Murray-Darling basin, Australia’s “food bowl,” in *Still: Life: The Food Bowl* (2011), turning the public’s attention to increasing salinity of ground-water in the area. More recently, rather like the Marukis, they have created “nuclear

art,” using uranium in response to the 2011 Fukushima nuclear meltdown.



**Ken + Julia Yonetani, *Global Warming is Over! (if you want it)*, bed-in performance, Federation Square, Melbourne, 2010.**



**Ken + Julia Yonetani, *Crystal Palace: The***

***Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nuclear Nations (USA) (2012)*, 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, uranium glass, metal wire, UV lights. Courtesy of the artists.**

In their “uranium art,” Ken and Julia install vintage chandeliers, replacing the crystals with (mostly depleted) uranium glass beads. UV light is used to make the uranium glass glow green. The artists developed the idea of using chandeliers when they were in London, where they saw ornate chandeliers displayed in the fashion boutiques near Sloane Square.<sup>3</sup> Although using uranium as art material seems dangerous, uranium glass (often known as Vaseline glass) has in fact been used in art for decades, in glass decoration, jewelry, and ceramic tiles. The artists applied a Geiger counter to determine that the chandeliers emit radiation that is only slightly above normal levels (1.3 micro sievert per hour, when placed directly on the uranium glass beads).<sup>4</sup> They take care with all their uranium art exhibits to make sure it is not hazardous to visitors.<sup>5</sup>

The art is thus both beautiful and radioactive. The chandeliers, the artists explain, explore the dread and sense of the unknown that people in Japan experienced in 2011. “Chandeliers are not only a luxury, but also an extravagant emblem of the beauty of electricity and the seductiveness of consumerism,” they say.<sup>6</sup> The uranium art was first shown in March 2012 at a group exhibition *Keeping up Appearances* at NKV in Germany on the first anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake. They titled the work *Crystal Palace: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nuclear Nations*, adding a layer of meaning and locating it firmly within a specific historical discourse: The Crystal Palace refers to the World’s Fair in London, 1851, which celebrated the cultural, scientific, and technological developments of the industrialized nations, and thus the uranium art highlights the adverse,

catastrophic consequences of industrialization. The artists exhibited three chandeliers there, scaling each chandelier to the size of the nuclear power industries of Germany, France, and Finland.

Later in 2012, the Yonetanis' uranium art was exhibited at two different galleries in Sydney, Australia. During the exhibition *Crystal Palace* in Arterreal between October 3 and November 3, the artists displayed fifteen chandeliers, adding ones for Japan, China, Brazil, and Pakistan, among other nations. Another exhibition, *What the Birds Knew*, at 4A Center for Contemporary Asian Art from August 3–November 3, 2012 comprised three different uranium artworks: more chandeliers, including one for the United States, text art, and ant sculptures. For the text art, they used the same uranium beads as in the chandeliers to create the texts “meltdown” “radioactive” and “electric dreams,” which resemble the neon signs common in all cities. The large uranium sculptural works of ants made with aluminum wire were inspired by the Green Ant Dreaming story of the Kuwinjku Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. The Kuwinjku believe that their land next to the large uranium deposit is a sacred site and that if the Giant Green Ant's eggs are disturbed, something disastrous will occur to people not only nearby but also far away. In 1970, a large deposit of uranium was discovered in Nabarlek, just next to Arnhem Land, and the uranium mined there was exported to three countries, including Japan.<sup>7</sup> In the Yonetanis' works, giant ants, angered by the human activity of the uranium mining disturbing their land in Australia, announce a disaster (perhaps the nuclear meltdown in Fukushima).



**Ken + Julia Yonetani, *Meltdown* from *Electric Dreams* (2012). Uranium glass, metal, UV lights, Courtesy of the artists.**



**Ken + Julia Yonetani, *What the Birds Knew* (2012) (4A Center for Contemporary Asian Art). Uranium glass, metal wire, UV lights, Courtesy of the artists.**

In my conversation with the artists, they shared with me their interests in Aboriginal stories and worldviews, and in post-war Japanese cultural images of nuclear power and catastrophe. As a scholar who works on Japanese art during World War II, their eloquent statements about not only the intersection of art and politics but also the differences between the two were particularly illuminating to me. At the end of our conversation, we shared fears and concerns

about how radiation concerns are being treated in Japan, and the emotions that have motivated the artists to create their uranium art.<sup>8</sup>

## Conversation

**Ikeda:** Your uranium sculptures of ants were inspired by Australian Aboriginal ant dreaming stories. It reminded me that art historian John O'Brian in his conversation with Japanese artist Ishiuchi Miyako, the creator of the *Hiroshima* series, talks about the indigenous Dene people in Canada who mined the uranium that was used for the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>9</sup> Although the Dene people did not know what the uranium would be used for, they felt responsible and visited Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1989 to apologize to the victims. I don't know if you were aware of this, but I think this points to the complex history and global dynamics of the nuclear industry.

**K. Yonetani:** I think the situations of Aboriginal people in Australia and Canada were similar, though in some cases the environmental damage in Canada was worse. We've seen a documentary film by Canadian filmmaker Magnus Isaacsson titled *Uranium* (1990), about a Dene medicine man who had a vision of a log being carried by a bird to the far edge of the earth, that caused the deaths of many people there. The medicine man says that the people who died looked just like the aborigines. His vision seems to have been about Hiroshima. In Australia too, there are Aboriginal stories and dreams about consequences of uranium mining, and we are very interested in them.

**Ikeda:** One of the problems with the nuclear meltdown is the invisibility of radiation. We don't know if our food or drink contain radioactive materials because they are invisible. I found the process of visualizing the invisible in your art very interesting. I know you solved this problem very effectively by using uranium and making it "visible" with the UV light, but could you speak to this issue?

**J. Yonetani:** Yes. Our work relates to lots of different aspects of invisibility. After Fukushima, we learned many new words, like sievert, a measurement of radiation levels. These things point to the "unknown." Many people are saying many different things, and we can't tell what the truth is. We were thinking about that, and in some way trying to visualize not only radiation but also the sense of fear that you have when you don't know.

**Ikeda:** The green color of your art works very well, I think, because it is beautiful but at the same time very spooky. Did you have other choices for color? Did you choose green? Was the green the only option?

**J. Yonetani:** The glass itself actually looks yellow, and sometimes blue, depending on what different colors there are in it. The green is the effect that happens when you turn on the UV light. It reacts with the uranium. That green is the only color produced in this way.

**K. Yonetani:** Japanese pop culture, like *Godzilla* and *Ultraman*, also show radiation as green. Our work also draws on that, and I think green is a good color to show radiation.

**Ikeda:** Regarding the color green, you also talked about green ants and Aboriginal tales in other interviews. Does the ant happen to be green too?

**J. Yonetani:** There is a place in Northern Australia where there are green ants. It is a very common ant. We are not sure if it is a coincidence that the dreaming story of the area is about an ant that is green in color, or whether it relates to the very rich uranium deposit that existed in that area.

**Ikeda:** So you really have green ants in Australia? (laughs)

**J. Yonetani:** Yes, some Aboriginal people eat them and use them for medicine. (laughs)



**Ikeda:** I am currently writing another article about “nuclear art,” the art related to Hiroshima. These art works include photographs by Domon Ken and Fukushima Kikujiro and paintings by Maruki Iri and Toshi. So they are two dimensional, representational, figurative, pictorial art. Your work is obviously different, as it is in the form of installations. In what other ways do you think your art is different from earlier nuclear art about Hiroshima especially regarding how the work engages with the viewer?

**K. Yonetani:** With a three dimensional work, the viewer can feel it with his or her senses. Installation creates a certain atmosphere. I think installation could have more profound impact on the viewer.

**Ikeda:** I understand that the rooms in your exhibitions were dark. Were there any auditory elements? Were there sounds? Or was there silence?

**J. Yonetani:** At the opening, an Aboriginal leader came to talk at 4A Center for Contemporary Asian Art. But other than that, it was very silent.

**K. Yonetani:** The atmosphere was similar to that of a Japanese *obakeyashiki* or haunted mansion. The ant and chandelier were glowing dark and green, and they evoked a sense of the unreal and paranormal, having a ghost-like quality. We did not include any sound in the exhibition because we did not want to disturb viewers’ senses.

**Ikeda:** I see some elements of history in your work, such as the chandelier, which has a long history as a luxury item in Europe. Your work’s title specifically refers to The Great Exhibition in London in the mid nineteenth century. This question might be more to Julia the historian, but how do you think your work relates to history?

**J. Yonetani:** That’s a good question that

nobody has asked!... Obviously my artistic work is very different from scholarly work, but definitely there are connections, and I think history is something that I have been always interested in. When I started thinking about the project, I drew on my knowledge and interests on different levels. My framing of the work hinges on history, and I look at issues like modernization, its relationship with the environment, etc. I see the Crystal Palace as a symbol of modernization, globalization, and industrialization.

**Ikeda:** I read your scholarly work, Julia, on Okinawa.

**J. Yonetani:** You did? (laughs)

**Ikeda:** Do you still work as a scholar?

**J. Yonetani:** No, I don’t work as a scholar anymore.

**Ikeda:** Do you think there is a connection between what you studied, such as war memories and state control, and your current artistic work about Fukushima and nuclear issues?

**J. Yonetani:** The connection I see is related to what I couldn’t do in academia. It is that all these things written about postwar Japan, about memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Japanese cultural expressions of them, suddenly, to me, seemed like a premonition of Fukushima. People were not only talking about Hiroshima, but actually people were talking about Fukushima before it even happened. Obviously as a historian I can’t explore these issues because these are not based on “facts.” Modern history is based on the idea of progress, and it is about looking back. But I think looking back could also be looking forward. As an artist, I am interested in different dimensions of time. A sense of time does not necessarily mean that the beginning is back and the ending is forward. The conception of time held by Aboriginal people, interestingly,

is also circular and very flexible.

**K. Yonetani:** In the arts, we can do and express things in a more abstract way.

One example that we think was a premonition of Fukushima is Kurosawa Akira's film *Dreams* (1990). In that film, Kurosawa almost dreams of Fukushima. The film consists of eight different dreams, and one of them, titled *Mount Fuji in Red*, is about a nuclear plant near Mount Fuji having a meltdown and people evacuating from the area.

**Ikeda:** Other people make a similar point. Art critic Sawaragi Noi, for example, was saying that the triple disaster was like Komatsu Sakyō's novel *Japan Sinks* (1973), which is about an earthquake and tsunami, coming true.

**K. Yonetani:** Many Japanese cultural products, like Miyazaki Hayao's film *Nausicaa* (1984), *Godzilla* (1954), and *Ultraman* (1966), are apocalyptic stories related to nuclear issues. I think they incorporate cultural memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Takashi Murakami's images that deal with mushroom clouds are another example. Like the Aboriginal Dreaming story, they seem like a premonition of Fukushima.

**Ikeda:** I was following your Twitter account, and it was clear that you are following political and social debates in Japan very closely, although you live in Australia.

How do you situate your work in relation to the political activism that is taking place both inside and outside Japan?

**K. Yonetani:** Talking about nuclear issues is taboo in Japan. The nuclear meltdown is as sensitive an issue as the emperor. I think people are trying to forget about it. I went to Kinokuniya, a Japanese bookstore, in Sydney and checked all the new books but none of them were about Fukushima.

**Ikeda:** There is a lot of pressure from the pro-nuclear government and nuclear industries that still maintain an enormous amount of power.

**J. Yonetani:** Compared with the people participating in the anti-nuclear demonstrations, I think we are working on a different level. Maybe some people think our work is not taking the issue seriously.

**Ikeda:** why?

**J. Yonetani:** I don't know, you need to ask them! We received an email from a Japanese woman saying we are not taking the issue seriously. Other people take our work as proof that Uranium is safe.

**K. Yonetani:** People can understand our message in their own ways. Our aim is to increase awareness.

**J. Yonetani:** Also to get people to think about it. Normally we do not see or think about uranium. There are a hundred different interpretations of our art. That's the difference between art and politics.

**K. Yonetani:** Politics is quite straightforward. People demonstrate in front of the parliament, holding signs. Our messages are more abstract. We try to touch them deep inside.

**Ikeda:** May I ask you to elaborate on the relationship between politics and art? I am inclined to think that there is an ethical responsibility on the part of artists to connect with society when they are dealing with such important issues as Fukushima.

**J. Yonetani:** I think it is a difficult issue. Maybe looking at the relationship between art and politics in a very broad sense, I guess if the art just becomes a message, it becomes propaganda art, like communist art and the art of "revolution." Art has something that politics doesn't and obviously politics has something that art doesn't. Art and politics intersect

somewhere, but they do not have to be the same thing.

If art and politics try to be the same thing, it just does not become art. It does not become something that has many different levels to it. Having many different interpretations is very important to art. We do not want to say, "this is the message." Because if you say that, you are already cutting out all the different possibilities that art has just on its own. It is up to the viewer. If you talk too much, it becomes something else. Our works are personal expressions of our anxieties. Whether it touches other people's anxieties or not depends on their anxieties.

**K. Yonetani:** Our works incorporate different levels of reality. We saw radiation leaking from our chandeliers; our works allude to Indigenous Dreaming stories and their concept of circular time and spiritual worldviews. It also sends out our neurotic kind of message. Different elements like these become merged and visualized in our art. Our works are hard to categorize and to link simply to politics. Of course, they include political things as well.

Our work is based on our fears. We live in fear. We live our anxiety. Julia and I have talked about why we are making art. Our consensus is that we live in fear and we care about our environment. We cannot live without responding or reacting against the nuclear crisis. We are all traumatized by Fukushima, and art-making is a healing process for us.

When Chernobyl happened in 1986, I didn't care much. I was too busy chasing balls on the high school playground. This time, I had much stronger anxiety, and I am paranoid. I look online every day to check the radiation levels in Japan. Not all information can be gained from mainstream Japanese media.

**Ikeda:** I know how it is. I think it is easier to get more accurate information outside Japan. When the earthquake happened, American TV

like CNN and ABC focused from the beginning on the possibility of nuclear meltdown, but the Japanese media didn't pay attention to that until very late. I was living in Vancouver when the earthquake happened, but I had access to more information regarding the nuclear issue than my family who lived in Japan.

**J. Yonetani:** They might also refuse to know the truth. We were just talking with somebody who has a house 25 km from the plant in Fukushima. You must already know about this since your partner is from Fukushima, but she was saying that people around the area do not want to talk about the radiation problem. If they talk about it, how would they live every day?

**K. Yonetani:** Millions of people still live in Tokyo. My parents are there, too. They do not want to leave Tokyo. I think silence is the only way to survive in the contaminated areas. They want to shut their mouths and close their eyes.

**Ikeda:** Yes. My partner's parents are still in Fukushima, but they do not talk about it and we do not ask. It seems that it is impossible to live there and think about the radiation issue at the same time.

**J. Yonetani:** If you do, you will probably end up like the main character in Kurosawa's film *I Live in Fear* (1955). In the film a Japanese man, worried about nuclear holocaust, eventually goes crazy. He wants to move to Brazil, but his family refuses. The title of our exhibition, *What the Birds Knew*, is the other English title of that film.

**K. Yonetani:** Evacuation or silence. They have a choice. Evacuation is what the protagonist tries to choose in Kurosawa's *I Live in Fear*.

**J. Yonetani:** Another reason why people in Japan do not talk about radiation exposure is related to *fuhyohigai*, the Japanese term referring to financial damage caused by harmful rumours or misinformation. That word

cannot be directly translated into English. I find that expression interesting. *Fuhyohigai* places the entire responsibility on those voicing concern, assuming that these voices are incorrect. But the question remains, without being hysterical, how do we measure risk, especially for future generations?

**K. Yonetani:** I think the majority opinion in Japan is that everyone should support the area affected by the disaster (*hisaichi*). Many people think that they should cheer up the victims and make efforts to help them, but this impulse could create a collective mentality (*shudan ishiki*). I have heard of a group called *Tabete ouen surukai* ("The Food of Japan Campaign" in English) established by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries, which tries to "support" the victims by eating food from Tohoku.<sup>10</sup> Many big companies participate in this campaign. I think this is a kind of *gyokusai* (collective suicide).

**Ikeda:** I read in a newspaper that even in elementary schools they use food from the affected area as a part of a similar campaign. I certainly see the same kind of mentality that was promoted during the war.

**K. Yonetani:** The mentality of *gyokusai* still exists.

**Ikeda:** Have you gone back to Japan since Fukushima?

**K. + J. Yonetani:** Not yet, but we are thinking of going in April or May this year. We are still scared though.

**Ikeda:** Do you have any plans to exhibit your work elsewhere? It was already shown in Germany and Australia.

**J. Yonetani:** This has not been finalized yet, but we might be able to show it in Canada and Taiwan. In addition, we are doing another show in Queensland, Australia in March. We also have a residency in Berlin from June this year.

**Ikeda:** Do you want to show it in Japan eventually?

**K. Yonetani:** Yes. We would like to, if we can. We have a chandelier named USA too, so we want to show it in the States as well. It is the biggest chandelier!

**Asato Ikeda** earned her PhD from the University of British Columbia and co-edited, with Ming Tiampo and Aya Louisa McDonald, *Art and War in Japan and its Empire: 1931-1960* (Leiden: Brill, 2012). As the 2012-2013 Anne van Biema fellow at the Freer | Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution, she is currently working on a monograph tentatively titled *Soldiers and Cherry Blossoms: Japanese Art, Fascism, and World War II*.

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## Notes

Sincere thanks to the artists who shared their visions of their art.

<sup>1</sup> For more on the artists and their works, see their website:

<sup>2</sup> Bridget Cormack, "Artists Discover the Benefits of Two for One," *The Australian*, August 18, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> "Ken + Julia Yonetani's Uranium Chandeliers," *Phaidon*.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Fortescue, "Radioactive Chandeliers Commemorate Japanese Nuclear Disaster," *The Art Newspaper*. March 6, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Fortescue, "ANSTO Gives Uranium Chandeliers the Green Light," *The Telegraph*. October 4, 2012.



<sup>6</sup> Johnny Strategy, “Ken + Julia Yonetani Respond to Fukushima Nuclear Disaster with Radioactive Chandeliers,” *Spoon & Tamago: Japanese art, design and culture*. August 27, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> See their exhibition press release.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the author’s personal experience

of the disaster, see Micki Cowan, “Our Campus: One Year Later, Asato Ikeda Reflects on Japan’s Triple Disaster,” *The Ubysey*. March 20, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> On Hiroshima: Photographer Ichiuchi Miyako and John O’Brian in Conversation

<sup>10</sup> For more about the campaign, see their website:in [Japanese](#) and in [English](#).