

## IDENTITY IN PLACE?

### A monograph on the artist Reiko Aoyagi

*“Love the questions and perhaps you’ll live your way into the answers.”* Rainer Maria Rilke

Reiko Aoyagi has made her home in Wales since arriving in Cardiff in 1993. She grew up in the rural Chiba Prefecture near Tokyo and initially qualified as a teacher. The limitations on the role of women in Japanese society and a wish to travel beyond her own cultural roots brought her to England. After studying art in London and Cardiff she has established a successful international practice based in a studio at Chapter in Cardiff.

Aoyagi’s experience of moving from Asia to Europe has brought an acute awareness of how differences in ethnicity, culture and language can compromise communication between people.

She sees the apparent global fusion of cultures as being superficial, bringing only a measure of acceptance for cultural variation. For her, dissimilarities between people still tend to be more prominent than similarity so that profound understanding continues to be hindered by perceptions of difference and dislocation. Aoyagi looks beyond the constraints of difference for the means to communicate an essence of humanity which may be common to all.

Returning constantly to the question, is there an experience of pure being which transcends our sense of otherness? The artist’s work is therefore synonymous with her personal existential journey. Her identity is sourced from a complexity of influence and experience and having few fixed boundaries, it shifts and changes. *“At the heart of the work, then, is a questioning of static identities in favor of a deep intuition of fluidity and interchange as primary conditions of being.”* <sup>1</sup>

The artist has worked in Wales, England, Northern Ireland, Korea, Poland, Pakistan, Japan and Australia. In each place a process of enquiry precedes an intervention which responds to it's location. Using the phenomena of light or darkness, sound or silence, enclosure or expanse, fragility and mass, the works are essentially sensate. The potential to transcend specific cultural reference in both psychological and physical space resides in the experiential events the artist creates.

The artist's MA dissertation '**The Dust in the Universe**' was a discussion of how the Elements of earth, fire, air and water have symbolised the human condition in Japanese and European cultures. This field of enquiry was inspired by Aoyagi's tutor and friend of long standing, the artist Caerla Ware. The dissertation became an examination of the ethos of her practice at a time when she began the attempt to move beyond symbolism, it begins with the following statement.

*"I have a vision of an open space. It has no walls, no boundaries.*

*It is open towards the outer and inner space.*

*It is open to everyone. It has a translucent quality.*

*It is filled with the energy of four elements - earth, fire, air and water the physical, spiritual, male / female and sensory quality of human beings.*

*It is not a fixed space. It is an imaginative space. It is a new space.*

*It is on earth but not fixed on the earth: it is floating."* <sup>2</sup>

A concluding paragraph that emerged from a conversation with the artist Cornelia Parker, suggests 'Dust in the Universe' as an image of the 'pluriworld' and it's infinitely various population. However, Aoyagi's installations pursue a hypothesis which she perceives as

existing in a space beyond words. She assigns titles to identify the works rather than to indicate their meaning or content.

Aoyagi made '**Untitled**' 1994, her first major installation, at The Artists Project, Cardiff. This was a work of water, light and air in an old industrial building. The interior surfaces were painted black reinforcing the strength and interiority of the space. The windows were removed and on the floor was a rectangular trough filled to the brim with water. Light flowed directly onto the water surface which trembled with air movement. The juxtaposition of black walls and intense light evoked the dark shadowy spaces of traditional Japanese architecture, challenging the European norm of the building as an enclosure. Inside and outside converged on the surface of the water.

The artists MA Show was the installation '**Untitled**' 1995 in her studio at Chapter in Cardiff. Susan Butler described it in a subsequent catalogue: *"The sense of the meditative in Reiko Aoyagi's pared down environments takes on at once a social and spiritual dimension. In the transformation of her first floor studio space, painted the palest grey (the colour almost of air) and scrimmed with the translucent material of projection screening, images from the outside appeared as shadowy colour and movement rather than clearly distinct forms. These images changed with the fluctuations of natural light and one's changing position within the room. The room provided a space for imaging and imagining that seemed like a kind of exterior mental space, inviting individual inhabitation, yet also obliging the recognition of others as parties to the experience."* <sup>3</sup>

In 1996 Reiko Aoyagi and Emma Lawton were commissioned to make consecutive installations at the Oriel Gallery, Cardiff as part of **Inscape Wales 4**. Again Aoyagi examined the dialectic of division between inner and outer space in the installation '**Untitled**' 1996. A contemporaneous review described it thus. *"One enters a large, cool, grey space relieved by*

*a yellowish light, falling on the single structural concrete pillar that stands eccentric, piercing the volume. Even the permanent steel floor is subsumed by the greyness of the walls and ceiling. The entire space is appropriated by the work, but the focus is the window which almost fills one wall and divides the gallery from the street. The glass has been laminated with a film of reflective translucent grey. The level of interior illumination, from a single source near the window, is balanced with that of the day.*

*Light is the operative element, holding the work static at midday and developing during the afternoon and evening, its own particular twilight of continuous change. As the street darkens, and reflections in the window solidify and become defined, you witness your own presence in the space. Simultaneously, the reflection of the pillar intensifies beyond the window until people passing on the pavement appear to walk through it. As the surfaces within alter, the grey around the window becomes so deep it looks softly absorbent. Other walls lose precise location and one's position in the space can no longer be verified by the norms of perception. The gallery floor, reflected beyond the window, appears to leave one's feet without support. In the street outside people pass, maybe quickly glancing at their image in the mirrored window, unaware that they have become part of the work." <sup>4</sup>*

In 1996 during a group residency at The Artists Museum in Lodz, Poland, Aoyagi worked within a derelict building. For '**White Corridor**' she renovated and painted a long narrow corridor to bring its form into focus. Shafts of daylight reached through open doors to suffuse the pure white space with the reflected green of the trees outside. '**Human Voice**', a computer generated soundtrack made in collaboration with John Thorne, added a further sensory dimension to the newly sensitised place.

Time limited projects like this one can be problematic for an artist who seeks a profundity of understanding before deciding what intervention would be appropriate. With the move

beyond the notion of 'art as commodity' fabricated in a studio and exhibited in a gallery, a new 'commodification of production' has arrived and with it, a pressure to produce a sequence of works to meet organisational deadlines. Aoyagi does not easily succumb to this mode of practice, her resolution for each new situation follows the process of a painstaking actualisation of thought. When her response takes on visual form in her mind, the work comes into sight like a ship on the horizon. Only then does she consider the technical aspects of realising the piece

In 1996 the artist Nilofar Akmut invited eleven artists to participate in an international workshop '**Between the Visible and Invisible**', at the National College of Arts, Lahore, Pakistan. The intention was to provide an arena for the exchange of ideas about cultural similarity and difference. The artists were asked to work collaboratively with the students and for Aoyagi it was an opportunity to extend her research in a new context. She worked with seven architecture undergraduates, guiding them through a process of interpreting their responses to the internal space of a disused male dormitory building. Surfaces were revealed behind many layers of paint, light from a lofty window and from the top of the chimney was redirected into the space with mirrors. The work responded to the high ceilings and clerestory windows typical of an architecture that protects the coolness of interior spaces in a hot climate. For Aoyagi, this project demonstrated that the foundations of a universal language can emerge from a collective process.

As part of the Brief Encounters programme of exhibitions in London, Aoyagi made an installation in **Gallery 97-99**. The work '**Untitled**' 1998 was sited in the basement, a cool, dark place in strong contrast to the vibrant and chaotic environment of Brick Lane outside. The weak light that reached into the space left much of it in dense shadow. The artist used sheets of dark perspex suspended from the ceiling to reflect and magnify the available light. The dank cold chilled the visitor and while the eyes gradually adjusted, the work maintained

perceptual uncertainty.

In 1998, four of the Lahore workshop artists exhibited together in '**Out of Place**' at the Chapter Gallery in Cardiff. For her installation '**Passing**', Aoyagi engaged in a process that peeled back the false walls of the gallery to reveal old ceramic tiles, windows and layers of dirty paint. It was a symbolic act of opening up the anonymous white walls towards places outside, towards the other artists. Some inches in front of these walls she installed a sheet of perspex which reflected the viewers presence against the abject backdrop, bringing the sensation of being simultaneously distanced from and absorbed by the surface.

In his catalogue essay for 'Out of Place', Sunil Gupta wrote: *"Aoyagi's self-imposed exile has led her to shed fixed notions of cultural traditions. She works here as an artist from another place but is not bound up with stereotypical values often associated by a Western audience with Japan, values of either tradition or kitsch. ... Her formal concerns lie with light in a number of ways; inside vs. outside, the light within people and ultimately how people become part of it. The dramatic environmental quality of her work engenders a specific response in the viewer, that is both her artistic strategy and the work itself."* <sup>5</sup>

'**Transmission A**' 1999 was sited in the bare concrete structure of an unfinished shop unit in Belfast. Aoyagi flooded the floor area creating a reflective surface to engage passers-by in reverie. The pressure of water on a sheet of clear polythene beneath, revealed the texture of the concrete introducing a visual tension. The notion of connectivity was suggested by the apparent unity of the water with the surface of the concrete. The mirroring of structure, windows and street life, imported a drama to the barren interior space.

Simultaneously, in the nearby alleyway at Exchange Place, she installed '**Transmission B**'. This work consisted of a single red laser beam the light from which was made visible by

clouds of smoke. Even in daylight this drab passage was dark and few people used it; in the past it had been the scene of violence. The intention was to energise the area and focus on positivity and lightness and thus to dispel the inner darkness that follows violence. The political dialogue in Belfast perhaps demands a contribution beyond the limits of the spoken word. These pieces took the form of a suggestion rather than a statement, a sensation rather than an aesthetic spectacle. As Robert Irwin said, *“The intention of a phenomenal art is simply the gift of seeing a little more today than you did yesterday”*.<sup>6</sup>

‘Screen’ was a four day international event at Bruce Allan’s studio in Gloucestershire during July 1999. When darkness fell in the deep valley, Aoyagi projected a motionless circle of light onto a sloping grass bank. **‘Untitled’ 1999** was a technically challenging piece with a deceptively simple outcome. Since a circle of light projected onto a slope will appear as an ellipse, a mask was made to redress the distortion, so that a perfect circle fell to the ground. People wandered in and out and around the circle, they sat inside and they looked from a distance, it became a place for sharing and interaction. Under a bright moon hanging in the true darkness of the rural night sky, this was a thing of wonderment.

In early 2001 Aoyagi spent a month in Sydney, Australia, as part of a group residency culminating in **‘Transparent I’**, an installation at Artspace. Initially she explored the city, keenly aware of her Japanese sensibility. She found a European city with a distinct Aboriginal district, a strong Asian presence, a pervasive American influence and an older generation that still believe Elizabeth to be their Queen. The artists encounter with this urban collision of cultures and ethnicities, reinforced for her the question of what kind of inner place we can collectively inhabit.

With the curatorial collaboration of Artspace director Nicholas Tsoutas, Aoyagi considered the possibilities. The work was to be sited on the lower floor of the huge old warehouse with

timber columns and a complex ceiling structure. Her first inclination was to use the intense daylight, but the summer sun is high in the sky over Australia and the windows were low in the building so the trajectory of the sun's rays actually brought little light into the space. The resolution was to use a green beam laser. The knife of green light dissected the space, was then bent diagonally by a mirror to focus in an intense vertical strip on the facing wall. A cloud of haze swirled through the laser beam giving it an organic texture. The bustling atmosphere of the outside world would enter the contemplative space within the viewer's consciousness. Aoyagi takes the pragmatic view that the use of natural or artificial light depends upon what is appropriate to each situation.

As part of the Japan 2001 season, '**Transparent II**' was commissioned by **Oriel Mostyn in Llandudno** on the coast of North Wales. Llandudno is a peaceful resort where the natural light has a cool translucence. The elegantly proportioned Victorian gallery is L shaped with moulded plasterwork and lantern windows above the coved ceiling. Aoyagi integrated the dynamic of the gallery's complex interior into a work with an exuberant atmosphere, in strong contrast to the tranquility of the town outside. The artist abandoned her pursuit of precision for a piece which intentionally lacked the perfection and 'distance' of previous work.

Oriel Mostyn was transformed into a sea of velvety darkness. Moving coloured shapes were projected into the space in a computer controlled sequence with the slow rhythm of breathing. Intense light of many colours punctured the darkness in all directions, animating different areas of wall or floor as the light projector rotated. Often the projection was distorted by a corner or by the conjunction of wall and floor reminding the viewer of the period detail of the gallery's interior. By standing where the light fell and looking up at its source, the beams appeared to have enveloping substance offering an almost physical experience. This work evoked the human condition of a calm exterior cloaking the drama within.

Bleddfa is a remote hamlet in the hills of Radnorshire, mid Wales. **'Transparent III'** 2002, commissioned by **Bleddfa Centre for the Arts**, was Reiko Aoyagi's first permanent installation in the landscape and forms the third in a trio of works using artificial light. In the adjacent gallery, photographic documentation of her previous work was exhibited together for the first time.

The hour of nightfall dictates the time when 'Transparent III' will be visible. It is sited where the grey gravel drive curves gently to a gully grating. The installation consists of a subterranean light source shining up towards the sky through parallel iron bars. The light rises incongruously from the darkness of the earth, a light form within. Light and dark meet in an intimate intervention with a mesmeric quality.

With sufficient rainfall, water overflow from a well on the hill above drains into the gully on its underground journey down the valley. This adds the sound of flowing water to the work and its turbulence causes the light to ripple and shimmer. The work reveals the water that shapes the verdant landscape before it flows on down the valley unseen, through the veins of the body of the earth. 'Transparent III' changes with the cycle of the seasons as rainfall influences the volume of water flow. Seasonal mist, rain and insects may reflect the light. During the twilight of the evening the light glows warm against a darkening sky, but stay until the sky reaches the depth of full darkness and the power of the work increases.

While she welcomes new contexts and formats in which to work, Reiko Aoyagi's practice has a consistency of enquiry. The principles of fluidity and change are deep convictions. Her work invariably presents a sensitised place, it may be a place of light meeting darkness or a place where interior meets exterior but always it will be a place without words, where boundaries are interrogated. She uses the phenomenon of light to articulate the perceptual

field by directing the gaze, yet the light itself may not be the object of the gaze. Time is also an element in her work, in the sense that music takes time. The viewer enters a contemplative, sensate space of potential that rewards those who linger.

And the question still remains, is there a common form of communication that humanity can share? Can a phenomenological enquiry reveal the underlying universality of human experience? If we knew the answers we would not ask the questions. Aoyagi's work is neither statement nor answer, it is a quest, an act of seeking.

Cristina Crossingham 2002

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue essay 'Window/Wall' by Susan Butler for *Inscape Wales 4*. Published by Oriel, Cardiff, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> MA Dissertation, 'Dust in the Universe', by Reiko Aoyagi, 1995. University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, Wales, UK.

<sup>3</sup> Catalogue essay 'Window/Wall' by Susan Butler for *Inscape Wales 4*. Published by Oriel, Cardiff, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Review of *Untitled* at *Inscape Wales 4*, Oriel, Cardiff, 1996 by Cristina Crossingham, *Untitled*, Issue 10, London, Spring 1996, pg.18.

<sup>5</sup> Catalogue essay 'Inside/Outside: Surrounded by Four Women' by Sunil Gupta for the catalogue for *Out of Place*. Published by Chapter, Cardiff, 1998. Taken from the original unedited version.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Irwin, as quoted in *The Art of Light and Space* by Jan Butterfield. Published by Abbeville Press, New York, 1993.