

Podcast Recording - Makiko Hara

Diane Wong (3:59):

Hello Makiko, thank you so much for talking to us today. I think that we could just start off with a little bit about your background and how you have come to find yourself in Vancouver.

Makiko Hara (4:15):

Okay, well, thank you, Diane and Coco, for inviting me for this special occasion. I was a Centre A curator from 2007 to 2013, more or less, for seven years. And the reasons I came to Vancouver were, I originally came to Vancouver, for the first time in my life in 1992. Just after I attended the Banff Centre residency and then after that, I established quite a lot of friendships and relationships and in some exhibitions exchange. Because first of all, Vancouver and Yokohama are sister cities and I was working very involved in Yokohama city art center and project and things so and then my mentor my and also partner, Masashi Ogura, who was a curator of Yokohama Citizens Gallery, who was the guest curator, did some exchange between Vancouver and Yokohama. We curated Jin-Me Yoon in 1999, so I have a friend already. And I was good friends with Hank Bull, who was the founder of Centre A. In 2006, I was invited by Vancouver Art Gallery to curate a project called Next, um something about Pacific crossing, like a Pacific crossing network or Pan Pacific or something, and invited by Bruce Grenville at the time. I email everyone that I'm coming to Vancouver and then Hank, immediately email me back and that was 2006 September: "You know that Alice, but Alice left last June, she got a job in Concordia so we don't have a curator, and so I'm learning by myself - are you still interested to come to Canada?" And so I say yes, of course. I was only staying one week in Vancouver to set up a Kyohei Sakaguchi's exhibition at the Vancouver Gallery, but during that week, Hank arranged the interview for me to apply for the job as a senior curator. And so we went through all those processes and then I got the news at the end of my stay, that I got the job. So I have to process the whole, you know, admin, visa and all those things. And then he definitely needed someone to come. I came in January 2007, and all kinds of working visa sorted out in three months. And then I apply immediately to the landed immigrant status. And it was an easy time. Not like now, it was an easy time to get a professional visa. And in 2007 October, I got permanent residency and that's why I kind of based in Vancouver since then.

Coco Zhou (07:22):

Um, what were your first impressions of Vancouver? I'm just curious.

Makiko Hara (07:26):

First impression? Um that was really like a long span, like it's over 30 years, I see the transformation of Vancouver. My first visit in 1992, I tried to go Western Front, VIVO... VIVO was located in the original place and then has a studio. So I walked up Main Street and then I

didn't know much about the Downtown Eastside because it was way before the Olympics and it was just so industrial. And then I got lost and then like walking in the industrial area with no people. So I found Vancouver to be a very industrial place, yeah, so that was my first impression.

Coco Zhou (08:14):

Yeah, that's really interesting, it feels like there's a little bit of urban development history there as well because you mention the Olympics.

Makiko Hara (08:23):

It's a big change since 1997-ish, around the Hong Kong turnover and then all those things that really changed. Downtown Eastside, I have very funny connections. In 1992 when I came first time to Vancouver, I booked with a travel guide, like Lonely Planet kind of thing. One night hotel, in order to just stay overnight to go to Banff. And it was terribly stupid that I didn't recognize that Banff is closest to Calgary. So I just booked a cheap hotel because I was young, 24 something - cheap hotel in Downtown Eastside. I took a taxi and said, oh, please take me to this hotel, and the driver said, no, you shouldn't go to this hotel, don't you know this is called Downtown Eastside, blah, blah, blah. And I thought that he's cheating me, so I said, no, no, no, I insisted, no, I booked the hotel, I stay there. He said, oh, you know, you are gonna regret, I can recommend you a hotel, blah, blah. But he was upset that I insisted to stay and then he dumped me. And then I was standing in front of one of those Downtown Eastside hotels with two suitcases and kind of full of fancy fashion and then like, holy shit. I don't know where I arrived to and I was so scared. So I put the two suitcases at the door and then push my foot against the door just in case. I couldn't sleep and the next morning I took the Greyhound bus to Banff so that was my very first Vancouver stay overnight.

Diane Wong (10:14):

Wow, that's a whole experience, I guess.

Makiko Hara (10:18):

So when I got the job at Centre A, my interview was taking place in one of the fancy hotels near the Vancouver Art Gallery - one of the board offices. I didn't really know about Downtown Eastside, and then, Hank, call me and say Makiko, you have the job. Come over. I introduce you and that was the day that Joni Low established the library, so it was a celebration of the library project. So I come and see Joni and other people, and like, holy shit. This is the place I passed very fast, like, this is my new gallery. It was a bit shocking. Anyway, I had a fun time.

Diane Wong (11:02):

Yeah, and this was at the BC Electric Railway building, right?

Makiko Hara (11:05):

Yeah, it was at the intersection of Carroll and Hasting. So it was the edge of the West and it's kind of the border of East and West.

Diane Wong (11:20):

Yeah, I take the bus by it everyday now to get to Centre A. It's a lighting store, it's very weird to see. Yeah. So the gallery was located in the BC Electric Railway building. I was just wondering, could you talk a little bit about the gallery's location within the Downtown Eastside? How did that gallery's proximity to the area change the type of programming and exhibitions that you were curating?

Makiko Hara (11:45):

Well, definitely, it really shaped my curatorials at Centre A, reflecting that location, more than the kind of Contemporary Asian mandate. My kind of challenge was how to put together and because the location itself is very politically charged, but it's also very rough, like, you know, I'm so happy that now after 25 years, that you now have the proper lighting and all those things, because I was hanging with a clip, it's super DIY. But Hank, he was super excited, that you know, this was the biggest gallery in the city and highest ceiling and it's, you know, it was a very historic building. It's true, it was just an amazing scale. That particular site was the former train station, so that all trains come and then stay. And then behind, it was a kind of train storage. And then the front. Hastings Street was the train and then I told him that it used to be more like a tram across the city, before the bus. It was a city, really a city center until 1950-ish, and the station closed and then the main center shifted to the west.

So at the end of my tenure at the Centre A, and in that building, we were kicked out, but I did a lot of research about the building and then realized that was 100 years in 2012. So it's one of the most historic building, it was, but unlike the other buildings like [unknown] and all those places being recognized as heritage, BC Electric building wasn't preserved or wasn't really acknowledged as a historic building, so you know, I didn't know anything about the Downtown Eastside, this kind of this stigma or kind of process and so when I arrived, I realized what what made Downtown Eastside, the politics around, there's so many social workers and so many homeless and and so at the time as you see, there's a huge front door, face to the Hasting and we really wanted to switch this because if you're facing to the Hasting Street and open and Hank, you know the former director Hanks personality, it's like everybody's welcome. You know, like we say, open welcome and no other store or no other gallery in downtown area that there's a lot of art speak or no like access, everything was out there but no, everybody's kind of shut the door to eliminate all boxes of the dental insider people but we were leading open so it's always has the kind of regular people come from St. So we kind of become friends or kind of dealing with they steal everything and so we have to wire everything and you know that we learned about the economy of the area and the economy and then at the same time we have

opening which always has a wealthy patron or you know like a fancy collectors. So it was the only place, I think, in Vancouver, that all Downtown Eastside homeless people and the most wealthy people come together. And that was really for me to think about contemporary art practice, really hosting super diverse people. And so it many many attempt that we did change of kind of regular mandate of Contemporary Asia shifted into the more social situation because of the Rakesh

Coco Zhou (17:25):

Yeah, that's really interesting how Yeah, the situatedness of the gallery at the time within that neighborhood. I think yeah, as you said, like, really defined for you what the public for contemporary art is. So I'm wondering - you were talking just now about how the BC Electric Railway building at the time wasn't formally recognized as a heritage site. And I think your own interest in the history of that building is informed by you know, your own migration history, your transnational connections, your attention to movement and relocation. And I'm wondering, so our podcast is funded by a heritage grant. And a question that we've been asking a lot of our speakers is how do you think about this notion of heritage? So I would like to pose that question to you. What does that term mean to you? How do you think contemporary art intersects with heritage?

Makiko Hara (18:33):

Well, you know, I realized that before Centre A moved out, the occupancy of the building was many, many cultural organizations come together and we did collaboration and things. Typically, the two key organizations in the same building - one is the UBC Architecture and Landscape Satellite behind our gallery. And I have a lot of friends at UBC so we did a lot of exchange. >And then also indigenous youth, urban youth. I can't remember, but there's an office that teach and work with indigenous artists to teach school kids or street kids, like filming or making animation or hip hop and the kind of thing. So it's all kind of come together and Centre is more about a platform. We were not really a regular gallery. So we put sofa, kitchen, and that was kind of my idea that we wanted to have a more social house. And in terms of heritage, one of the exceptional professors, Annabel Pogler, who was a co-curator of my last show at Centre A called Two From, which original idea was from Annabel. I think her PhD or master thesis was about the building and functionality, that location and the street angles everything that she knows about the building. So I proposed her, I'm thinking about the Centennial Anniversary Show in 2012: could you be my co-curator? So we did together and we went to access the city archive and the CBC radio, and they have the videos and all those things. And it's this bunch of fragmented information about the building. So our task was putting together the whole information, making slideshow and map and talk, public programs, and then inviting people to provide their memory or photo and things. And then at the time, we had a really great assistant who was really good at public relations. And so she put all information to all kinds of media, not the art magazine, everything. And then like Provence

newspaper, which usually never picked the art or show, but because of the subject, the kind of future of that show, and then the Province newspaper has reached out to so many BC local people. And then they found out and they come all the way from Kamloops and all those places, because after the BC electric building stopped being in the station, and it's transformed into the Banquet de Montreal for a certain time, like 1950s to 70s or 80s, and then Banquet de Montreal moved out. After that, I think in the 80s, the Dantanese situation changed, and maybe not a big organization wanted to take over that particular location. So the history was kind of stopped, carried on after 80s. And many, many people came that used to work at Banquet de Montreal. So they bring their own kind of photos and memories and things. It was just astonishingly interesting. So for me, the heritage, probably, it's not just recognized by the professional evaluators, like architect or historian and government. But in a way that for us, the value was evaluated by a lot of people passing by that building and carry the memory. That was really an unexpected kind of feedback for the show.

Diane Wong (25:11):

Wow, thank you for answering that. And you were also you know, I think you might be the only one who has curated exhibitions and multiple Center A location. Yes. Yeah. I think you are the only one who was because you were essentially a curator and residency in 2016. When we were on East Georgia. Yeah, we were in East Georgia where Massy book is now. So you've worked with Santeria law over the last like, a decade or so. What were some of the projects or collaborations that are the most memorable for you? Like what were the early days of the gallery? Like, like, Uh huh, no, yeah.

Makiko Hara (25:54):

Well, it says a lot. So I mean, each site carries the kind of very particular contents and then my show or like my curatorial is really responding to the context. Not just a kind of physical site, but it's more context like Chinatown, in a small gallery and but is the Chinatown like it's the change from Downtown Eastside and the new location still Chinatown but somewhat building with it's almost kind of a collective of the, you know, like artists center kind of different group of peoples there. And most of it I can't pick the most memorable one because that then that other like 100 artists gonna be pissed off. But for me, even though I curated at Georgia and then recently worked with you for Makiko, I feel so grateful to continue to work with the different generation of the curators and staff, and then also the different generation of the space. But people probably in the community remember me as a downtown Eastside Centre A person. And probably because of the context of that location and I come from Japan, I'm not Asian-Canadian. It took me years, years to understand Asian-Canadian issues in the different groups. And to be honest, I never see contemporary art from a very narrowing Asian perspective before coming to Canada, because I am never thought of as Asian in Japan, it's not necessary. Now it's shifted, the Asian politics is shifted, so more identity politics or solidarity with the culture tie is important, but in the 80s, 90s, when I started to involve in

contemporary art, we were all looking at Western, we wanted to go to Documenta, Venice, to understand what contemporary art is about. So I work a lot with French artists, with Canadian artists, but not necessarily about Asian things. So my challenge was how to put together and how to use the most of that space, the privilegedness, that no other place can do, no other public gallery can do, that the space, size, and kind of you can literally do anything. So in order to break the wall, the kind of institutional unspoken rules that a gallery should be, my most memorable project in that aspect was David Khang's How to Feed a Piano. That's the way we, I mean, you did the interview with him so that people can see the both sides, the curator side and the artist side. And Hank was very hesitant. Like usually every year in the spring, before the grants application, we brainstorm what I want to do in the next three years and then revise the whole project every year. And David approached me about this idea, so bringing a horse and blah, blah, and said, oh, yes, once I bring a horse into the gallery, I can bring anything, you know, like a tractor or whatever. And contemporary art should be like that. So the David proposal, for me, opens up the possibility. And I negotiated with Hank. You know, that I met with David for the first time, and we definitely should do this. And Hank said, no, no, no, no, it's too much, Makiko. But David got the grants, so do not worry about money. And then I convinced Hank, this is important, you know, because Vancouver Gallery cannot do it, more cannot do it, but Centre A can do it. So it is a big chance for us to promote how inclusive we are. And then, but Hank was, so I had a strategy. I invited Hank to play the piano, obviously. And then also at the time, Candice Hopkins was a really great friend, and we collaborated on different projects, but she grew up with the horses. She grew up in Yellowknife, and she's really close with the horse. So she's very comfortable. And then David looking for one more performer who can ride a horse, and I suggested, how about Candice? She's really good at the horse, and so she can take care in case that the horse get upset or crazy and running away. She is able to handle this. And so we approach to Candice and say, why not? But it completely changed the context because she's indigenous like now. She's like most important top 100 person, but she was still walking at the Western Front as a curator. And then she was like, okay, I'm up for it. And then she become cowgirl. You know, like it was kind of funny. So me and David work together. David has original idea, but because we decide to host it, he has to adjust to make this possible. So it was an interesting challenge. And besides of many, many great exhibition, I curated, but also so many guest curators did. Every show was very memorable. But I know it's only one night. I'm happy that we published the book, but it's only one night. And then we put so much effort, but it opened up so much possibility.

Coco Zhou (33:28):

Yeah, that's so exciting to hear the kind of behind the scenes of how you were strategizing and putting this together. And it's also interesting when you were just now talking about how you conceptualized identity changed after moving to Vancouver. And you recently returned to Centre A in September of this year as a guest curator for Intimacy and Distances, which is the first solo exhibition in Canada of the Tokyo-based artist Maiko Junishi. And it was also the

show, like, thematized on, you know, this post-COVID, or I don't even know if we should call it post-COVID because we're still in it, but it's this idea of intimacy and how relations are challenged or reconfigured in this time. And could you tell us a bit more about the development of the project and what it was like to return to Centre A?

Makiko Hara (34:34):

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So, Maiko, I wanted to bring her back because I curated Maiko at the LIVE International Performance Biennale in 2017, where we commissioned her a new piece and then she made quite astonishing works called The Sound of Desire. And then she stayed two, three weeks to develop with John Brennan, so she became friends.

It's good for bringing artists back once it's established some network. So I was always thinking about that. And then during the COVID time, I was invited to curate a group show at Kamloops Art Gallery, where I was planning to bring her another piece. It was very kind of a crucial piece that she produced called Where We Going After We Die. And it was a five channel video installation. It's quite large. It's all about reflecting the different culture in Japan, which is almost opposite to Canada, that it's un-multicultural officially. There's so many, you know, like immigrants or people living, but they're not recognized. And then Makiko was curious about how other cultural people, funeral or cremation or those custom or you know, that kind of thing. So that was she, it was documentary combined with her personal story. It's about how to deal with the cremation and all those things. And it's including Muslim peoples and then also unknown Korean born during the war and then the ashes is no place to go back. And then also I saw Gushan's amazing exhibition between Centre and Canton Sardines, so I thought, oh, it's fit really well. You know, it's a very different perspective from Chinese-Canadian and then Japanese. And then Kamloops become the first site of residential kits and marked cemetery and all those things. And that was June that year. And the show was supposed to open in September, October. And then I decided I have to cancel this. I don't want to disturb anything at the time. It's difficult. And I myself don't know how to explain about this work in the context of Kamloops, you know, like Indigenous children. So, Makiko was very disappointed, but agreed. And then I promised her that I will do some other occasion, but can I cancel it? And after that, Henry, former director, who is also my kind of colleague of the Pacific Crossings, asked me, are you interested in curating a show at Centre A? I said, sure. And he was interested in nd about Makiko. He saw one of the Pacific Crossing programs, we did a group of four BC based artists and then a Japanese artist talking about recent situation during the COVID online. And then he said, oh, I love that piece. And then like, you know, I'm curious about this artist. And then I was thinking, maybe at Centre A, after a couple of years of that indigenous Kamloops, you know, issues could work. But for some reasons, I decided, I don't know. Well, Henry left, and it's like a situation change. I start working with Diane. And I wasn't really comfortable to bring that particular piece. It was budget cost more, and, you know, many different reasons. So I talked to Makiko openly. I'm sorry, Makiko, again, that I had to cancel. That's where we're

going after we die. Can we change? And I need to brainstorm. And then it's a lot of conversation I exchange with Makiko. And she's really an involved and engaged artist. And then she knows Vancouver. And I really wanted to show something. It's not in the Vancouver community or Vancouver scene, something different. >And maybe I should make a completely new show so that's how I disestablish. And what was the question? I'm sorry.

Diane Wong (42:05):

You can talk about whatever you want. Yeah, we just shipped the workbox. Okay. I mean, we can jump into the next question. I think it's our last question as well. You know, you've also had a very prolific curatorial practice as an independent curator outside of centrais as well. And recently you curated Lani maestro's neon installation, No Pain Like This Body, at the Vancouver Gallery Offsite Project. And the work was actually first shown in her first solo exhibition, Her Rain at Centre A, in 2010. Could you end our podcast with telling us a little bit more about how the work resituates itself in a different location and what that was like?

Makiko Hara (42:54):

And then I was asked to curate Offsite quite a short time. And the Vancouver Gallery asked me to propose two works between November to spring, and then like May to the fall. And then we start talking about the late summer. So literally, I don't have much time to establish a commissioning work for the first one. So I thought, okay, first one, I'm going to do some existing work, or like some work I know well to handle it. And the second one, I do completely commission, because I have a leading time for a year. And I visited Offsite many, many times to think what's appropriate. And that was still about the ending of COVID. And then the distance, remote shutdown, and all those things still kind of mask things. And during the COVID, I lost a lot of friends passing, not just by COVID, but it's a very heavy, dark feeling in me. And then also the most disturbing thing was every time I commuted to Vancouver Gallery to discuss Offsite, my house is in East Vancouver. I take a 20 bus down. And we originally made that piece in Les Bondage to the downtown Eastside situation. It's about human dignity and all those things. And Downtown Eastside gets 100% worse since then. It was tent, fire... When we originally made that piece in 2009 or 2010, that was about Olympic time, and this transition of downtown Eastside, it was just beginning. And we still have a human kind of relationship at the time. So that Lani responded to, not just miserable homeless kind of things, no, it's about more dignity of people and how to engage with them. But we still have a barrier with the huge grass, but how to pass through the windows. That neon sign was because of the light going beyond the grass. So that even though we install in Centre A's back wall, in the evening, the light goes through the windows to the street. And it was amazing. And then that piece went to the Venice Biennale in 2019, and now it's in Manila. So it's travel, and then it's really engaged in a very different audience in a different way. And because of that, I passed by the downtown Eastside so often and during the COVID, and I saw my intention of that neon piece at the time. After 13 years, the situation got really worse. And it was wanted to bring the

kind of disparate pain that is not in downtown Eastside. It's everywhere, I felt at the time. And so I talked with Lani and said, you know, it was almost the opposite context. Like Centre A in downtown Eastside and next to Shangri-La, Off-site is like the most wealthy part of Vancouver. But I intentionally wanted to put it that way. So unless people read some texts and things, usually off-site, people just pass by and view. I was curious how that was indeed and how the work engaged with who. And it's actually a very provocative piece that got vandalized a lot. Some people are cutting the flag or some people did the graffiti. And I think it's disturbed some people. But at the same time, I got amazing feedback. They feel like they are hugged or understood of their pain. I got very emotional feedback from people. I have no idea where they found me. It was just such a simple thing, but it transformed the space. And I believe that art really had that power regardless of the location. So I found it's very interesting that it started from Centre A and went to Venice, Manila, and then Shangri-La, and then maybe something next. So I was very happy to bring it back to Vancouver in that way.

Coco Zhou (50:15):

Yeah, that's really lovely to hear. Yeah, thank you so much for you know, your insights on the history of Centre A and of the changes and transformations. Also it seems like not much has changed and maybe has even gotten worse in many ways.

Makiko Hara (50:39):

But in a way that in terms of that kind of social context, it's become more visible for sure. Yeah, inequality. And then people get angry because everybody knows what's really happening behind. And COVID gave us time to pause and then think where we are and what we can trust and what we cannot trust and all those things. I think it's an interesting time for contemporary art, that artists and the curator's organization can take a position for what we do next. And I think it's Centre A's 25th and next step. It's really, you know, me and Hank, we both kind of old, you know, like a grandpa and grandma. We worry so much and it's like, okay, let's forget about Centre A. Let's not talk about that because it's so uncertain for a long time. But I'm really happy that last summer I talked with Hank, in his summer house, that he invited young people to curate the next show. I said, oh, good. So we don't need to worry about them. Like they don't need the grandpa and grandma to do that. I'm really excited about your new faces. So, good luck.

Diane Wong (52:30):

Yeah, no, it was such an honor to work with you over the loss like with Michael show as well. And as well as like, you know, talking to you here now. And also talking to him kind of everything like hear about like what the early days were like and like what the dreams and like what the dream is for sentry wise and like, yeah, like we're not gonna get into like the but uncertainty was underneath previous years. But I have high hopes for Centre A moving forward. Yeah, thank you so much again. for taking the time to talk to us.

