Andrew Paul Keiper & Kei Ito
Woke New Media Panel Talk
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All stills from this presentation can be found the end of this PDF, following the Appendix. All accompanying videos are referenced in the text by file name at the point in which they were shown.

Introduction

Kei Ito is a conceptual photographer, typically working in the realm of camera-less photography. Andrew Paul Keiper is mainly a sound artist, sound designer and musician, but has experience and expertise in other media including fabrication, woodworking, painting, video, photo and performance. Together we collaborate on installation-focused work.

In 2014 we matriculated at the Maryland Institute College of Art, where we were both candidates in the Photographic and Electronic Media MFA program, then under the directorship of Timothy Druckrey. We connected earlier in the summer online as we sought out prospective housemates to put together a group house. We finally met the night before MICA’s orientation at BWI airport when Andrew picked up Kei who was flying in from Japan, and with that we were jumped together into the fray of graduate school.

We were so busy that it took us a couple of weeks to finally sit down and have a conversation about who we were, where we were from, and where our families came from. As we discussed this, Kei told Andrew that his grandfather was from Hiroshima, and Andrew asked him if he was present when the Americans dropped the atomic bomb. Kei replied that he was, and Andrew took a deep breath and told Kei that his own grandfather was an engineer who helped to create the atomic bomb as part of the Manhattan Project. We had a profound, quiet moment together and vowed that we’d one day collaborate on work about this. Kei came to work on this theme sooner than Andrew, but by the end of our two years in the graduate program, we were both working on it, and were starting to collaborate together.
Infertile American Dream

In order to contextualize our work together, we wanted to tell you about an artwork that each of us has done on our own, starting with Kei.

My practice as a photographer has changed drastically since I started to make work regarding my atomic heritage. My grandfather witnessed a great tragedy that destroyed nearly everything in Hiroshima; vaporizing his sister and killing other family members with radiation poisoning. He survived the bombing, and later became a profound anti-nuclear activist, and he passed away when I was 9 years old.

He told me before he passed away, that “the day in Hiroshima was like hundreds of suns in the sky”, and this statement has been haunting me for all my life. It is this cursed and blessed statement, where I started my signature process of exposing light sensitive photographic paper directly to the sunlight to create my work.

This particular project is called *Infertile American Dream* which is one of my more politically driven works. I made them by exposing a chromogenic paper to sunlight, with an unassembled model of house, on the day the 45th US president was elected. As a person who uses sunlight to make artwork, the day in which I make the print can carry significance.

Not does only his anti-immigrant ideology threaten my status as a foreigner who is a resident of America, but his nuclear policy, especially regarding the nuclear tensions between the US and North Korea have been truly unbearable. It harkens back to the terror of my grandfather’s experience during the bombing of Hiroshima.

On that day, the very fabric of life that my grandfather knew, his friends, family, and even the landscapes of the city were completely demolished. Any trace of home seemed to never have existed, as if his home was never even built.
Today, the political divides have deepened, and nuclear war seems closer on the horizon than it has ever been in my lifetime. We live under the realization that home, in both a physical and a spiritual sense, can be taken away in as quickly as thirty minutes by a single missile, and the chain reaction that follows. After we reach the point of no return, the American Dream will be unsustainable – an empty and barren wasteland filled with nothing but ash left for future generations. Like the unassembled model home in *Infertile American Dream*, our children will not have a chance to conceive their ideal vision of hope for the future.

After creating the piece, I was approached by a NYC based art-billboard organization called 14x48 and we worked together to mount a two month long billboard exhibition. The funny part is, that the billboard was originally to be placed near Times Square, but when one of the major sponsors for the organization realized that the piece was criticizing Trump, they backed out of the project. 14x48 managed to find a different sponsor which donated a space in Brooklyn, near the Graham Avenue L Subway Station. The project was well received, but it was also a learning moment of type of obstacles I may need to overcome in the process of making public art.

Now Andrew will discuss his sound-based work, *Rough Ride*.

**Rough Ride**

In the spring of 2015 the Baltimore Uprising erupted in response to the Baltimore Police killing Freddie Gray. Having participated protests and other actions during the Uprising, I spent that summer grappling with how to engage with this event and my experience of it in my work, and in a fashion that acknowledged my privilege and that wielded it towards a purpose.

I encountered the work and writing of Lawrence Abu Hamdan that summer, the brilliant sound artist and forensic acoustician from whom I gained the insight, obvious in retrospect, that listening is a political act. Analyzing my experience of the Uprising with this in mind and appraising the odd corridor exhibition venue in which I had been invited to mount a
small solo exhibition in Fall of 2015, I created a work called *Rough Ride*, an 8-channel sound installation.

The work consists of recordings I made during the Uprising, recordings I pulled from social media posts and mass media broadcasts of protesters, journalists, pundits and politicians, played out on six loudspeakers arrayed on a 16 foot shelf. The listener engaging this work cannot hear everything all at once, and the sound of the loudspeakers to which they are physically closest mask the sound of more distant loudspeakers. The listener must themselves choose how they navigate the work, just as one had to choose what media one listened to or watched, or what direct experience one had during the Uprising – you couldn’t be in all places at once, nor hear all media perspectives simultaneously. The work had one additional element that played out from loudspeakers hung from the ceiling: recordings I made of the Foxtrot police helicopters, Baltimore’s most ubiquitous aural embodiment of the surveillance state. I made these recordings during protests that September outside the pre-trial hearings that preceded the ineptly prosecuted trials of the police responsible for Gray’s death.

In addition to this adversarial and diffuse presentation of media, I folded over all of it an imagining of the horrifying experience of Freddie Gray inside of the small space of the police van, a lonely acoustic world utterly unlike the sonic world of the Uprising, which was a soundscape of spectacle both on the street and via media portrayals. In order to make this recording, and to understand, even if just in a small way, what Gray experienced in that space, I asked a colleague to effectively give me a rough ride in a rented van. A rough ride is an illicit police brutality tactic used to subdue or punish an arrested person in a police van, where the driver drives the van aggressively, in order to batter the arrested person, who is typically not strapped or belted in to their seat, but is otherwise retrained and unable to protect themselves by holding their body steady. In the case of Freddie Gray, who was already injured when the police put him in the van, the rough ride would have been racially devastating.

My purpose in doing this, and portraying Freddie Gray’s experience in this way was to draw a clear connection between the aims of the protestors and what Gray went through, a connection that the media so often ignored, in favor of fear-mongering about arson and looting, and so-called
riots, storylines that they could comfortably situate within the master narrative of our dominantly white supremacist culture and the authoritarian law-and-order rhetoric of our political discourse.

See video file: 002 Rough Ride excerpt.mp4

Making this work was key to everything I’ve done since, in how it gave me a structure for clearly portraying political themes within the form of a sound installation, in how it forces the listener to engage with the un-dependability of media, embodied in the visually prominent loudspeakers, and in how multichannel audio could take advantage of unusual venues for presentation. What’s more, this work gave me a chance to put documentation of the Uprising in a prominent part of MICA’s campus, where it could force engagement with the experiences of communities that the institution and its students and faculty don’t always heed. (Several of my peers literally fled the city during the Uprising, with the encouragement of representatives of the school.)

**Afterimage Requiem**

Shortly after we finished grad school in 2016, we applied for and subsequently won a Rubys Artist Project Grant, supported by the Deutsch Foundation and the Greater Baltimore Cultural Alliance. For this grant, we proposed to make an epic scale work called *Afterimage Requiem*.

The materials that comprise the piece are 108 photograms produced using sunlight and Kei’s body, a 4-channel audio component consisting of field recordings made in New Mexico and Chicago at atomic heritage sites, and sound design imagining the research and production of the bomb and related sounds. And also, a very, very bright Fresnel spotlight of the type used in film production.

After some difficulty in securing a suitable venue, a curator told me about the Baltimore War Memorial and we were fortunate to secure it. As a space that would be used as an emergency shelter during times of crisis, it amplified our intent that the prints be laid out in a fashion that implies the aftermath of a catastrophe, as if a the piece portrayed a makeshift
morgue, triage center or hospital. Kei will now explain the process and significance of the prints.

The 108 photograms show shadow negative exposures of my body on the ground, with the viewer looking down upon them. These prints are more directly inspired by my grandfather’s description regarding “the hundreds of suns lighting up the sky,” as these prints are also made with the use of sunlight, 108 of photo sensitive paper and my body.

The use of my body as sort of a camera is very important for this project. As I believe, the radiation to which my grandfather was exposed, which pierced through his skin and inscribed itself onto my grandfather’s genes, and that cursed light was passed down to me; our bodies are now being “captured” through time and history, film and DNA. The print is result of my desperate act of visualizing the inherited atomic light.

The creation of each print is somewhat ritualistic, as I created them in a completely darken room. I placed a sheet of unexposed light sensitive paper on the floor and lay myself, naked, on top of the paper. My studio assistant let the sunlight from the window into the studio, for the duration of one breath to make the exposure. The intensity of the light is completely uncontrollable for me as it depends on the time of the day, weather and cloud placement. It functions like an act of god, imposed upon helpless victims, and so it is the perfect medium for this project.

108 is a number with ritual significance in Japanese Buddhism; to mark the Japanese New Year, bells toll 108 times, ridding us of our evil passions and desires, and purifying our souls. Incorporating this number in my ritualistic image-making, each print in the installation bridges between the past and present, and hopefully a prayer for the future.

Now Andrew will speak on the sound component of Afterimage Requiem, among other things.

Sonically, the two elements of the audio (natural sounds made from field recordings and sound-designed audio of human-generated sounds, mostly portraying the creation of the bomb), play out from opposing sides of the space. The audience enters from the side in which the field
recordings play out, and the human-generated sounds play out from loudspeakers on the other side of the space. This emphasized the structure of the architecture, and created a dynamic in which the audience would be encouraged to walk amidst the prints in order to better hear the details of the farther loudspeaker’s audio.

The field recordings from New Mexico include sounds like insect buzzes, bird calls, the rustling of foliage in the breeze, footsteps in gravely dirt and rain. The sound design that portrays the creation of the bomb is far more episodic, and breaks up the 32 minute duration of the audio loop into a loose arc, starting with a sequence that suggests the coming of war via morse code signals, and the sound of someone tearing up documents as secrecy becomes the newly imposed code of the formerly radically open physics community. This all gives way to a blatantly operatic pulsing drone that resembles the beating of the engines and props of massed bombers. The subsequent passages, which we’ll listen to momentarily feature excerpts from the Los Alamos Primer, a lecture newly arrived scientists heard upon the start of their work in Los Alamos in order to indoctrinate them, as it were, in the most current ideas of nuclear physics relevant to the task at hand. After we hear material from the Primer, we’ll hear the start of a section that depicts the build up of the site, and its encroachment on the New Mexico wilderness.

See video file: 003 Afterimage Requiem documentation.mp4

There are some themes from our work more broadly that I’d like to focus on, using Afterimage Requiem as an example: the piece has the logic of a fever dream, wherein elements not literally adjacent in time or space are compressed together and invested with symbolic significance. This is typical of the work that we do together and of my sound design. Not only does it convey a certain effect to the audience, but in how it collapses time it allows for the audience to encounter a breadth of sonic experience in a reasonable amount of span and it reasonably negotiates the random fashion in which audience enters into a looped audio installation, by not needing a discrete beginning, middle and end to be legible.

I’d like to comment on our materials and processes. By using actual sunlight to make the prints and field with recordings made in situ at distant
historical sites, the production and presentation of the work functions almost akin to ritual magic. This is typical of our work, and how we use the literal, the authentic, the artifact and the factual to cross-pollinate our images and speculations with something that has provenance in the events of phenomena we address. In doing so, we shine a light of transformation back onto these real things, and in doing so transform them in the minds of our audience.

The venue for this piece became almost a third collaborator, and provided a deep symbolic opportunity for us. The Memorial is a grand neoclassical hall, an architectural style tied in the United States to the legacy of white supremacy, and is so often used to legitimize and embody the crushing power of authority and government. We pointedly covered its entire floor with the symbolic portrayals of the bodies of dead Japanese people, whose victimhood the machine of military prowess treated as a means to an end, and whose suffering it sought to minimize or cover up.

Furthermore, the hall had been built as a WWI memorial originally, and there is a direct through-line to what the men whose names are on the walls experienced and the dropping of the first atomic bomb. Warfare as an industrial process, into which you feed civilian conscripts en masse, and out of which you produce piles of corpses, via machine gun, gas, incendiary and explosive shells came into its own in WWI, and in order to break its trench-bound stalemate, war planners devised strategic bombing of civilian towns and cities. In WWII, this would become the key methodology of the Western Front and was implicit in the tactics of the mass mechanized conflicts of the eastern European theater, and was central to the endgame of the Pacific Theater. Finally, it doesn’t take much imagination to replace hundreds of bombers, each with dozens of small bombs with a single bomber, bearing a single large bomb. So for me, it was haunting and profound to portray the creation of the atomic bomb and to show its victims in a space where the names of the dead of WWI bear witness.

I’d like to speak on the droning elements of the sound of Afterimage Requiem and related works and its connection to my practice as a musician. Drone music has long been a primary mode of my music making, but in my work on the the theme of nuclear weaponry and the
Manhattan Project, it’s taken on a different quality. Instead of using it as a means of exploring timbre and time, and other formal qualities, I now inexorably link it to the droning of our industry and technology, of the processes that mark modernity, and in a sometimes subtle but unmistakable contrast to the soundscapes of wild places. This theme ties into how I explore intertwined and contradictory questions of what is natural in *Afterimage Requiem*: we used a potential that is inherent in nature to produce an utterly artificial result, and all the while hid our very artificial means in very wild spaces. The sonic elements of *Afterimage Requiem* bind together through a sort of sound art version of the classical rhetorical figure of *antithesis*.

One other aspect of our work together that’s worth commenting on is the different registers in which we each tend to work, due to who our grandfathers were and their individual relationships to us and the world. Kei knows so much about who his grandfather was, what he accomplished and had to say, whereas I don’t know even exactly what my grandfather did. Consequently, Kei’s work is often very biographical in stance, and directly emotive in ways that echo the words and deeds of his grandfather. My work often flows from historical research and aims to imagine the work or perspective of folks in positions similar to that of my grandfather, but tends to remain moored to my research on the history and science of the Manhattan Project and atomic age, even when it takes a clear stance, as in the work we’ll discuss next. This difference is almost akin to Stephen Jay Gould’s formulation of *magisteria*, and has allowed us to create work where we complement each other to achieve a coherent end result, even while what we each bring to bear is very different in origin and perspective.

**New Light-Narrowcast**

In Spring of 2019 we had the opportunity to bring our work to the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and we titled the exhibition *Archives Aflame*. This seemed a fitting name for our work, carrying with it the implication of a crisis of culture, community and memory, and a threat to the continuity of story and spirit. On the other hand, it might be read as the archives being aflame with a potency and a life, something they carry forward to initiate a better
tomorrow. This combination of darkness and hope is characteristic of our
work, and of our aspirations for the impression we aim to make on our
audience.

For the exhibition we showed *Afterimage Requiem* alongside images that
documented our trip to New Mexico, another piece called *Ash Lexicon-
Silverplate*, and a new work called *New Light-Narrowcast*. Kei will tell you
about it now.

*New Light-Narrowcast* is a video installation comprised of declassified
nuclear test footage and audio played via a WW2 era radio. I managed to
find around 50 declassified test films that were conducted by the US
government during the Cold War. They were mostly conducted on US soil,
including in New Mexico, Nevada and the US-occupied Pacific Ocean
islands.

An interesting and often overlooked fact, is that the United states and
United States citizens were the first victims of nuclear weapons and its
radiation. These people are called Downwinders as they were usually
exposed to the radioactive material delivered by wind from nearby testing
site or uranium refinement factory. The first downwinders were exposed to
fallout from the Trinity test conducted before the bombings of Hiroshima
and Nagasaki.

After finding these testing films, I broke up each video into 40 to 120 still
frames from which I made a photogram using my sunlight expose method.
After exposing them to a tinted sunlight (to make the prints green, so as to
evoke the green-ish color of Trinitite, a form of fallout created by the Trinity
Test) and processing the prints, I re-scanned each print and recombined
them into a single video. I also placed objects on the prints while I was
exposing them, which results in occasional interruptions of the footage.
Now Andrew will discuss the sound for this piece.

The sound system for *New Light-Narrowcast* as presented at SECCA was
a Philco brand AM tube radio from 1943, to which I transmitted the audio
via AM radio signal. Here again we have the idea of using an actual thing
and carrying its power into the work, and transforming it reciprocally. The
audio it played out consisted of a sort of poem reflecting upon and
indicting the regime of testing carried out in the American West, and taking up the cause of the Downwinders who unknowingly lived their lives under a rain of radioactive fallout. The poem swerves between addressing the experience of the Downwinders to imaging the potential victims of atomic bombs used in warfare. Another theme the poem takes up is the coevolution inherent to an arms race: innovations in bunker technology breed innovations in bombs and vice versa, in a paranoid cross-border seduction, of sorts. All of these themes and topics swirl together in full fever dream mode, harried by a recurring loud, distorted interrupting tone that seems a blight upon the transmission, and which made the radio physically shake, alarmingly. (To read the complete text of the poem, please consult the appendix at the end of this document.)

See video file: 004 New Light-Narrowcast excerpt.mp4

This was our first foray into filmmaking together, and we expect that it’s just the first of many more efforts to come in that direction.

We want to thank you for your time and attention and join with us in our desire that we see history not as bygone but as present and borders not as an irrefutable force and determinant of our fates, but as something to question, to scorn and from which we can achieve liberation if we should so choose.
Appendix: text of Narrowcast poem

May the light have mercy on us
May the wind have mercy on us
Protect our homes

Our ears strain to hear the bombers beating the air
The intake of their jets,
The intake of our breath,
A light,
The urgency of our listening,
Your breath a blast wave across the silent morning
The bright hour of death

These houses stand empty
Graves above the sand
“To give our nation perpetual victory over all its enemies”
250 decibels shear away our sins
Can you hear it ricochet off the mountains?
This music is eschatology
This music is itself an ending
Do you understand yet, or what?

Steal the life from all homes
Steal the homes from all lands
Murder the sky
Scathe the earth
Boil the waters into poison steam
A dream of dawn in hell

The obliteration of color
is the penalty of power

The dead to come
are the penalty of power
The poverty of generations
is the penalty of power
A dream of dawn in hell,
Do you understand yet, or what?

Building rubble out of homes.
Shrines to our prowess
Everything soot
A light

Hear our voices in the wind
Choking in the wind
Vapor in the wind
Taken by the wind
Downwind
Up in this hot wind
Churning heavenward
The view from the churning cloud of the broken town down below
Taken past the threshold of annihilation,
a prompt and utter destruction
An egalitarian armageddon,
Generous in death
Do you understand yet, or what?

In the dining room,
Chewed by one hundred thousand splinters,
Drinking the electromagnetic pulse
Gamma rays laugh through our flesh
As impolite as politics

On the porch,
We watch the valley
Every tree shakes loose its life
storms of dust hide the road to the shattered school
The archives aflame, all memories lost
Unwritable litanies of questions,
Unquenchable tongues not answering
Faces face down and face up both.
After 250 decibels,
and the crackle of fire
the cracking of timbers
the crackle of skin
the cracking of hope
the silence prevails.
What do you hear?
This silence is eschatology
This silence is itself an ending
Do you understand yet, or what?

Underneath the transept where the broad wings cross the fuselage
the bay doors open

Above the quiet valley, where the sand sagebrush greets the morning
the bay doors open
The kiss of capacitors to set it all off,

A light not meant for eyes
A sound not meant for ears
Cinders on the wind
The bay doors close.
A halo rises into the sky and leans downwind,
a profound iconoclasm,
what follows this?
Do you understand yet, or what?

On roads cut across the flat, the trucks roll in
The men have come to measure
To gently place their data in the reliquary
With wisdom they meditate upon the problems
to build a better bunker
to build a better bomb
to build a better bunker
to build a better bomb
to build a better bunker
to build a better bomb.
Or to put a bomb underground,
hollowing out the earth,
dirt erupting in vast billows
the air wracked with dirt cast from the hell of the blast below,
the air wrecked with the poison of the bomb below,
wreathing Nevada with its venom.

Across the valley, a tower bears its bomb,
the sparing architecture built to become vapor,
Its spindly girders a special planned obsolescence.

Such a tower stood at Trinity once
before giving way to a waste of green glass
one Monday morning.

The tower is gone
even it’s battered footings are no more,
but it looms over us all the same.
Do you understand yet, or what?

When the voice on the radio asks you if you’re ready,
breathe slowly
before the city ruptures
before the house splits open
before your children shatter
before democracy caves in
before the tired mountains yawn open
before the empty graves fill with the dust of the Great Tribulation.

The laughter of rational actors
thieves of the world
death cult
singers of the bunkersong
the very regime of death
The dead to come are the penalty of their power.
Do you understand?
Do you understand?
Do you understand yet or what?
Rough Ride

Andrew Paul Keiper
New Light-Narrowcast

Kei Ito & Andrew Paul Keiper
Thank you!
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