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## Taidan: Ken + Julia Yonetani speak to Cash Brown...

**Taidan:** a conversation, interview, dialogue. (Japanese origin)  
- *The New Nelson Japanese - English Dictionary*



*Ken + Julia Yonetani\_Still Life: The Food Bowl\_2011\_install shot*

In 2010 Ken & Julia Yonetani completed a Synapse art-science residency awarded by the Australian Network for Art & Technology (ANAT) which resulted in a three month collaboration on location in Mildura, with scientists at the Murray Darling Freshwater Research Centre and Sunrise 21. *Still life: The Food Bowl* is the resulting body of work. It is made entirely from groundwater salt that as part of salt interception schemes has been pumped out of the ground around the Murray-Darling in an effort to try and reduce salinity in the river system.

The following conversation took place on Friday 29th April, 2011 between Ken + Julia Yonetani and Cash Brown, curator of *Still Life: The Food Bowl*.

**CB:** It is hard to know where to start with you guys, normally I would have heaps of prepared questions, but your practice is pretty intense and you are addressing so many layers of issues and meanings in your work...

When you first start a new project, are all of these issues and concerns already apparent or does it come with the process as well?

**KY:** Probably the idea first.

**JY:** Yeah I think it comes with the process. We start getting one idea and then it continues to develop...

**CB:** So the layers of meaning load themselves in quite naturally? As it doesn't appear to be a forced process to me, would that be the case?

**KY:** Yes

**CB:** In relation to your original idea of a body of work made from salt, did you go to Mildura with *Still Life: The Food Bowl* as a preconceived idea or concept, knowing about the salinity issues there, or did it happen as a result of spending so much time in the area?

**KY:** We actually had a different idea before going there, but during the residency, we were inspired a lot by the local people and the landscape, and then also by the information gained from working with local scientists.

**CB:** But what actually sparked that interest? Was it something you saw, for instance was it the result of anomalies in the landscape which you observed? What was the first thing that tripped off that idea?

**KY:** We were actually amazed, one of the things that had a really strong impact on us was the juxtaposition in the landscape of the beautiful vineyards and orange tree farms, right next to the flood plains which were completely degraded due to rising groundwater and irrigation drainage, which had caused such increased salinity that nothing could live there anymore.

It solidified in our minds that it would be really great if we could make something out of salt, as a material, because then people could really connect it straight back to the problems of salinity.



**CB:** Where did the Still Life: The Food Bowl idea come from?

**JY:** We were interested in trying to link together the idea of people consuming food with the environmental impacts of that food consumption. This idea has always been a theme running through Ken's work, for example, you can see this with his sugar installation *Sweet Barrier Reef* (shown at the Venice Biennale in 2009). The idea of the 'still life' came from the idea of 'the food bowl' and toying with the notion that the Murray Darling basin is known as Australia's food bowl. So we started thinking maybe we could have a bowl with some fruit and call it *The Food Bowl*, but then we realized that it is really a still life - so then we went back into art history and began researching the tradition of the still life genre. What we discovered is that

the still life genre actually began at a point in history when agricultural methods first enabled people to begin consuming different types of agricultural products which they previously would not have had access to. So we linked the work back to that too.

**CB:** Were you shocked when you saw how degraded the landscape (in Mildura) was? Were you expecting that level of degradation?

**KY:** Yeah, totally we had never seen anything like that before. The land is so salty and we were amazed that we all consume the produce from this region and yet most of us are pretty unaware of the impact this has.

Talking to the farmers was also a strong influence. When looking at environmental issues the local farmers are often criticized because they are the ones irrigating the water, but it is the people in the city that are eating the food these farmers grow, so we wanted to confront these deeper issues as well. When you live in the community you get a more complex view, and see the plight of the small farmers too.

**CB:** How much of the salt occurring in the area is natural? I know that you discussed some of this with local scientists and that some of it is in fact a naturally occurring phenomenon, or is it in fact a result of human intervention within that ecosystem?

**JY:** It's definitely a contentious issue, but even to a layman's eye, I think you could say that the amount of degradation is really astronomical, especially in the last 10 - 15 years.

You can see this from the fact that there are massive trees everywhere that are dead, so there must have been an ecosystem there before for the trees to survive. Also we spoke to locals who said things like "yeah and that area there had frogs and birds and fish in it only ten years ago" and now it is just a bubbling saline solution straight out of the ground.

There has definitely always been salt in the ecosystem of this region, but the floodplains are not surviving because the natural ebb and flow of flood and drought is no longer occurring. According to some people, this is due to human regulation of the flow of the river, which is causing problems as it means there can't be a massive natural flood, something which would ordinarily wash the whole system out naturally.

For example, the flood which occurred early in 2011 was nowhere near the levels reached in the past, despite much higher rainfalls, partly because of the way in which the river is being regulated.

**CB:** I am personally quite horrified by all of this as I have not been out to Mildura for about 17 years, however I spent a lot of time in Mildura in the seventies and eighties, as well as close to the mouth of the Murray River in South Australia and saw this area as a wonderful playground, as well as a kind of lush oasis. So the shock value is there for me, particularly in light of your research materials and the photographs you have taken of areas of the landscape where you gain your sculptural material. It's not something that seems to be widely reported on and nor is it in people's consciousness.

It's interesting though that you are making really beautiful objects which are highly aesthetic, yet given their deadly material they become quite ironic, which can be seen as very Australian. How do you feel about using your art as a political vehicle? Even though it's very gentle, I know you aren't trying to smack people in the face with it, but it is certainly not something

that a lot of Australian artists tend to engage with. What are your aims on that level?

**KY:** Obviously the point of reference is salt, I wanted to use the beauty of the salt and also its spirituality to depict the death of the landscape through the idea of the food bowl. I also wanted to express this issue in an urban context, drawing attention to the fact that people are consuming the food grown in this region and this is the result of their consumption.

So in that way we think that the material of salt (as an artistic medium) has a really great impact on the consumers (of produce).

The hardest thing was to make the salt (sculptures) hard, and to bind the salt. This difficulty then became symbolic of the struggle between irrigation and food production, as well as the necessity of salt in our lives and the difficulties in maintaining a healthy and useful balance.

**CB:** I am still really intrigued about the process involved in creating this work, as I often find this side of your practice quite mysterious. This is obviously an incredibly labour intensive project. Do you ever lose heart? Or do you feel so strongly about the subject that you can just keep plugging away at it, even though a lot of the work involved is repetitive and you have been plagued with lots of technical problems and production issues (such as locating a dead Murray cod and then having to cast it in 38 degree heat; rainy and humid weather slowing the drying process; problems with the availability of raw materials in the quantities required; engineering challenges etc). This side of an artist's practice often goes unseen, especially the labour component, which in this case is impressive and monumental in itself. How do you feel about that?

**JY:** I'm sick of it! (laughs)

As we speak it's the worst time, we are desperately trying to finish the salt chandelier (which involves 5000 individually hand cast, hand finished, drilled and threaded grapes).

I really felt like I was a fruit picker this morning, like I was trying to pick an acre of oranges by myself.

**KY:** I feel like a labourer in a factory!

**CB:** Like a process worker?

**KY:** Yeah it's crazy, I have to think about future projects in my head.

**CB:** Do you think that working collaboratively (as husband and wife) makes the work easier or do you end up fighting?



**KY:** We have to get on, otherwise we couldn't finish it - this project has been too big to be completed by one person.

Everything is new, and dealing with this material is extremely difficult compared with sugar. And there have been lots of failures.

**CB:** So no divorce is on the horizon?

**KY:** Hope not! (Ken and Julia both laugh)

**KY:** Change the topic!

**CB:** There is a royal wedding tonight so I thought it was appropriate!

**CB:** It's amazing you guys always seem to be so good-humoured, positive and enthusiastic about your work and have a wonderful attitude towards your practice. There is a lot of intrigue around collaborative practice, especially those between husband and wife teams, and there are often questions such as 'is one person more dominant than the other?' and 'are there clashes of ego?' I don't get that from you guys at all, it seems to be that everything is done through the power of agreement, is that true?

**KY:** We have been together a long time, I think we depend on each other, we are always talking a lot, on many topics, and so we get ideas from talking together and ideas become clearer and better by talking about them.

**JY:** It helps that we didn't actually start off doing art together, we have been through a lot of stuff before we started doing this, so maybe our relationship was at a place where it was pretty strong at the time. It had to be strong enough for both of us to start doing stuff together. I think the relationship didn't build up through the art, the relationship built up first, which then made it possible for us to start working together.

**CB:** Well its certainly very fruitful, pardon the pun!

**JY:** We take things with a grain of salt.

**CB:** Nooo! (Moans)

**CB:** So have you been throwing any (salt) over your shoulders lately?

**JY:** We do every morning before we look at the news of the day.

**CB:** Has that (the Japanese tsunami, earthquake and resulting nuclear crisis) affected your work, in terms of a world view and issues not unique to us here in Australia?

**JY:** We think the work is really relevant in the sense that half way through, we started thinking of it on a more global scale but it wasn't just connected to Mildura, it was this idea of the decline of civilization. Do you know that book by Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. He goes through societies throughout history and looks at how humans have wrecked their environments to the extent that these societies can no longer sustain themselves. The most obvious example is Easter Island, so salt really becomes a metaphor for this idea because obviously there have been major empires in the past that have over irrigated and turned fertile land into desert and have had to leave areas that have become too salty as a result - for example in Mesopotamia and in South America... The more you look into it the more you find this has happened in so many different ancient civilizations.

The idea of wrecking our environment and ultimately leading to our own decline is an issue related to Mildura, but you can also say it is totally connected to Fukushima and the devastation of the environment and the issue of food security – the fact that people aren't going to be able to produce their own food anymore. Especially in Japan in the northern areas where they are extremely sustainable, they eat what is locally grown and caught from the sea, as well as vegetables they have grown - some estimate that 70% of what they eat is from the local area.

**KY:** When I stayed in Mildura I was surprised that local people were eating food from big supermarkets like Coles or Woolworths and that the food isn't from the local markets, it's from Sydney. So they are growing food, it travels to Sydney to market, then it is transported back to Mildura, so the people are eating local food, but it's been on a long trip. I think it's really a modernized consumer society.

It is interesting that in Fukushima, the aid organisations are dropping tins of spaghetti and baked beans so people can eat, but they have never eaten this before and also they don't like the taste, but they can't eat anything local because of the radiation. So they have to eat it, they have to get used to it.

This is the extreme end of environmental degradation.

**CB:** As Julia mentioned earlier, environmental concerns have been a recurring theme throughout your practice and will probably continue to be, as things probably aren't going to fix themselves. What do you hope is the best possible result of bringing these issues to the attention of audiences? What's the main message you would like people to take away with them or is it a non prescriptive approach where you invite people to contemplate issues and work it out for themselves?

**KY:** I hope people get many messages from the work by themselves. I don't want to try to make them feel captured.

**JY:** I think the power of art is that you can have a message, but you can also have fun with it, I think that's what makes art so fun and memorable.

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