

Interview

The following interview took place at the JSPS London offices on 21st March 2012 between the organizers Professor Kozo Hiramatsu, Dr. Rupert Cox and Dr. Angus Carlyle to evaluate the success of the recently held Risky Engagement Symposium:

Polly: What was the objective of the Risky Engagement Symposium held in January?

Rupert: One of the objectives of doing a collaborative project like Air Pressure was to make the work do something more than entertain an art gallery audience and to engage with an academic community coming from Japan. This was a really important possibility because of the involvement of the JSPS. Many of the Japanese scientists who came together perhaps were not aware of the possibilities of doing art science collaborations.

Polly: Angus?

Angus: I agree with what Rupert said about the symposium but I think one other objective in the symposium was to promote the collaboration between different disciplinary perspectives. There were three main perspectives. One perspective was artistic, one was scientific and one was social scientific. This triangle of perspectives in the exhibition was duplicated within the structure of this symposium and the choice of contributors from Japan and the UK.

Hiramatsu: From the JSPS side, this symposium was organized by London office and unlike the symposia usually conducted between the UK and Japan in this country which operate from the bottom up and are often very, very narrow specified themes. Because this symposia was organized by the London office, I wanted to make it a broader theme. Also, I was interested in doing the symposium in collaboration with science and art as the JSPS doesn't support art, so collaboration between art and science will give us a new perspective for science. So, that is why this symposium was organized.

Rupert: I think that there are two interesting elements of this; one is the importance of communicating science to the public. That is something acknowledged in different ways within the UK than within Japan because in the UK there is a more sustained interest in what art-science projects may be capable of. In the case of this project we were very aware of these responsibilities to the public because of the nature of Prof. Hiramatsu's work. The other interesting element was an intellectual question, which is how do we as academics also understand what art science collaborations are as academic work. That is a more problematic question. This is what we were trying to address in the symposium, by using the opportunity of bringing people together and to produce something out of this in a book. Together, the book and symposia

represented the intellectual project.

Polly: What do you think were the good practices in the communication of scientific knowledge that come through in the symposium?

Rupert: There are different disciplinary ways of people presenting their work and that can be problematic. Sometimes though when disciplines are far enough apart, actually these different ways of presenting materials can be inspiring and there isn't necessarily a perceived threat to discipline integrity. Sometimes the differences actually enable dialogue and that happened in the symposia. We also wanted to take the disciplinary differences and used them creatively in producing a book which showed correspondences, links and also the tensions which could be productive tensions.

Angus: This was interesting for me and is something that I told to my artist colleagues at the symposium. They were aware of and identified a number of points in the symposium where people were talking almost in the same language but they were using those words in different disciplinary perspectives. So the issue of Chernobyl came up in a number of different presentations and there were artistic perspectives on what happened in Chernobyl and scientific **perspectives** too. I think this was because of the material some of the Japanese researchers were looking at, for example, literary accounts of Minamata, and so that became

a kind of opportunity for thinking about this relationship between disciplines and between different ways of analyzing the relationship between the environment and human activity and health.

Rupert: This came out in the symposium with situations in Minamata, Fukushima or Narita, where as scientists or as artists, there were similar issues about the nature of the materials to be identified and dealt with whether as an artistic resource or as data. This was something we knew from our work in Narita where we had huge amounts of data, and very complicated calculations which the public don't understand. We were trying to find a way to take the data and turn it into another kind of material. This is what was happening in the symposium as well and an interesting question is whether in doing that, you maybe change the thing, the object of your work and what you understand by it in the relationship to the public and in the relationship to one's own discipline. I think that this was what was evident for me during the symposia and one of the things that I thought we could work with to create something in the book, about the different kinds of materials, different ways of working, different sets of possibilities and different ways of responding to the public.

Polly: Prof. Hiramatsu, do you have anything to add?

Hiramatsu: Among Japanese researchers who attended the symposia, they vaguely

knew each other by name or by each other's books but they had mostly never met before. They were very much influenced by each other and they were very happy to be here together. But, what about on the UK side?

Angus: I think on the UK side, there were new relationships formed on the symposia day even among people who knew each other before, because they were presenting their work in different ways and to different audiences and through that, they revealed something different about what they were doing. This is about moving from the particular to the general and thinking about how to communicate that material and data in parallel with how the process can alter how you conceive the original data. I think similarly, that working in that symposium was about a multi-disciplinary focus which involved people in re-thinking how they will present in their own practice and perhaps we will re-think our practice itself.

Polly: So, do you think the view points from the researchers in the UK and Japan were effectively brought it together?

Rupert: If there were differences it was not by virtue of geography .

Angus: I agree, and I think the disciplinary boundaries were more visible and audible than the geographical boundaries.

Rupert: I think that if there was a difference, it might be in the mechanisms supporting

these kinds of collaborations in the UK and in bringing people together like we have so as to produce the work and I don't know if that is quite so possible in Japan. In the UK, we have the Wellcome Trust which is a very important long term sponsor for art-science collaborations. It isn't so evident to me that in Japan the same kind of collaboration have been supported in the same way so as to make it possible for people to do what we have done.

Hiramatsu: We can also take this symposium and the Air Pressure exhibition as well, as a sort of communication of science which is a different perspectives from academia.

Angus: Definitely. I think that's why on the opening afternoon of the symposia, when there was a gallery talk which by involving the public as well was very rich.

Rupert: I think ideally, if we've do this again then we will involve the public even more and give greater opportunity for Japanese visitors to talk to everyone and to have them respond to us and to the public.

Hiramatsu: Will you explain why the engagement is called "risky"?

Rupert: The risk is that the two perspectives of art and science remain distinct without any kind of productive communication. Therefore it was very important that we were able to develop the event with Prof. Hiramatsu so as to know about the people who would be responsive to this kind of approach. It could otherwise

have been an event, which led to different positions being represented and nothing actually coming together in the middle and the public could be excluded. The risk is that there is no response to the public or the responses are only in terms of what the artists are doing in the gallery.

Angus: The title 'Risky engagements' also worked at another level since one of the things that unified the different contributors was precisely that they engaged with the notions and consequences of 'risk' – understood as danger - in their own research. Whether or not they are scientist or artists.

Polly: What are the main outcomes of the whole event?

Angus: I think one of the things I came out from the symposium was the potential of collaborative, inter-disciplinary methodologies. On one hand, for instance, in the symposium the genuine feeling was that people were properly engaged with each other, learning from each other and inspiring each other. On the other hand, what I got from the day was a more sharp sense of how lucky I was to be brought in to this project when we are genuinely collaborating and respecting each other.

Rupert: Something else that came out, following on from what Angus says is about the recognition of different kind of publics. The Air Pressure exhibition was one thing and JSPS symposium was another thing in terms of their different audiences. A

book is another thing also and these different forms can do different things for different publics. Working in an inter-disciplinary way means that you do have the possibility to create forms that can crossover between a number of different publics. Because of the collaboration, these kinds of ways of communicating the work became much more evident to me.

Polly: Prof. Hisamatsu, what is your feeling?

Hiramatsu: Yes, Japanese researchers all have broad perspectives but they have little opportunity to collaborate with artists or especially foreign artists. So for them, this symposium was very, very stimulating and an impressive experience. They were talking about that. This was especially true of the sociology professor, Japanese sociologists have very broad perspectives but in this case the professor never had such an experience with doing collaborations with auditory research people. So I think for Japanese researchers, this was a very, very good, impressive experience.

Polly: Excellent. I am moving on and what is your future plan? What is your next step?

Rupert: We are continuing doing collaborative work together and there is a possibility of a project together in Okinawa.

Angus: I think that even if in the future I work on my own, the experience of working

with Prof. Hiramatsu on the project and on his vision, has changed quite dramatically how I approach any project I am involved with. But we know already that there is a possibility for us to work together again in a different setting. So, yes, it is very positive.

Hiramatsu: So, this was the first case, in my view, that the JSPS organized a symposium, It is especially unusual that the director organized a symposium on the basis of his own research. I don't know if this can be done in the future, but I think other directors or another centre should maybe try to do this. That would be an interesting outcome of our project.

Polly: OK, thank you.