



PHOTOS BY TODD GRAY

# Louder Than Words

Award-winning filmmaker Ann Kaneko isn't afraid to tackle the controversial in her documentaries, making statements that resonate long after the screen goes black.

STORY Jennifer Chen

When Alberto Fujimori took over as president in 1990, Peru was in a state of peril. The economy was suffering from hyperinflation while a bloody civil war between the army and a guerrilla movement, *el Sendero Luminoso* or the Shining Path, ravaged the country. Fujimori fixed the economy, but when

Congress objected to his strict anti-terrorism legislation, Fujimori disbanded Congress, declaring he would need complete control to fix Peru's problems.

During his presidency, artists like Alfredo Márquez suddenly became terrorists simply because Márquez painted Chairman Mao. Sentenced to 20 years in

prison, Márquez spent four long years in a tiny cell in solitary confinement. Artist Claudio Jiménez Quispe had to flee his countryside home in Ayacucho because of the Shining Path's insurgency. Unable to show his work during the unrest, he secretly chronicled the violence in *retablos* (traditional wooden display boxes depicting Catholic scenes). When the state began clamping down on freedom of expression, artists were forced to censor themselves.

Miles away from Peru, Los Angeles-based filmmaker Ann Kaneko was thinking of a subject for her next documentary and found Fujimori fascinating. "He used the way he looked to garner support among the population, saying he was more like the Peruvian people than the white guy [Mario Vargas Llosa] was. He was a hard liner that was both loved and hated. I didn't agree with his politics, but I felt like he was a very curious character," she recalls.

While raised in the predominantly black Crenshaw neighborhood of Los Angeles, Kaneko (who is fluent in Spanish and Japanese) had lived in Japan after graduating from Bennington College in Vermont and had always wanted to

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live in Latin America, particularly Peru, known for its high concentration of Japanese citizens, second only to Brazil.

Kaneko planned to use a Fulbright scholarship to film her own version of Michael Moore's *Roger & Me*, which she jokingly referred to as "Fujimori & Me." However when she arrived in Peru in March 2001, Fujimori had fled after a major corruption scandal involving his security chief Vladimiro Montesinos, who was accused of taking bribes, wire tapping and, worst of all, creating a death squad under Fujimori's rule. When the Peruvian government collapsed in September 2000, Fujimori went into hiding in Japan and reportedly faxed in his resignation.



Left: Ann Kaneko shooting in Japan. • Right: Japanese-Peruvian artist Eduardo Tokeshi, featured in Ann Kaneko's award-winning documentary *Against the Grain: An Artist's Survival Guide to Peru*.

Kaneko's original idea had to be scrapped, but it didn't take long for her to find a new subject, which she found in the most unlikely place — the streets.

The streets of Peru are like blank canvases themselves for citizens to express their anger, their frustrations and their desires. After the Fujimori upheaval, fed up Peruvians took to the streets with public "art actions," like *Lava Lavendera* (wash the flag) and *Muro de la Vergüenza* (wall of shame). "They were very symbolic for the country," says Kaneko. "For *Lava Lavendera*, citizens and artists were literally hand-washing the Peruvian flag in buckets of water, cleaning away the corruption and hanging them all around the governmental plaza. ... It's like hanging the American flag around the White House." After viewing both public actions, Kaneko decided "to focus on people who were really doing work that engaged with the social and political discourse that was going on in Peru.

"I wanted to share what I had learned from Peruvian artists about the role that artists can play as social critics," Kaneko continues. "I was impressed with their perseverance, passion and commitment to fight for freedom of expression." Thus began a six-year project that resulted in an hour-long documentary called *Against the Grain: An Artist's Survival Guide to Peru*, winner of three filmmaking awards, including Best Documentary at the DC Asian Pacific American Film Festival in October 2008. Kaneko also chronicled her journey producing the film in a blog ([www.AgainsttheGrain-Peru.blogspot.com](http://www.AgainsttheGrain-Peru.blogspot.com)), which includes additional information like screenings.

The film centers around four such outspoken artists whose work examines different parts of Peruvian life amidst social and political unrest. Japanese-Peruvian Eduardo Tokeshi suffered racial backlash after the downfall of Fujimori. He was told to "go back home to Japan" even though he was born in Peru and spoke no Japanese. In response, Tokeshi made a series of flags that mimic Peru's national flag, exploring racial identity and Peru's bloody past. Natalia Iguiñiz, a young mother and artist, exhibited controversial images questioning religion and the body, which the Catholic Church censored. Iguiñiz also exhibited a series of photographs depicting middle-class women posing with their housekeepers, igniting issues about social status and work. Claudio Jiménez Quispe and silkscreen artist Alfredo Márquez are also featured in the documentary. In the film, Quispe explains that he feared exhibiting his work under Fujimori's rule, and was forced to only exhibit his *retablos* abroad.

Interwoven between these artists' stories and their respective works are significant pieces of Peruvian history, providing context for their artwork. Kaneko narrates the film. "For me personally, when you're living in a country that's dysfunctional, as an artist, you have a responsibility to say something or do something about it," she says.

A screening in September 2008 in Lima proved to Kaneko that all of her hard work weaving art, history and politics together had paid off. The documentary was powerful for Peruvians who had for the first time seen a film about their country's past regressions. "There is an appreci-

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ation for the film now because now they want to make sure it never happens again," says Kaneko. Asian American film festivals across the U.S. have embraced the film, earning Kaneko several top prizes.

Ever busy, Kaneko isn't basking in the glow of her well-received film. She's too busy working on several other projects, which also promise to be just as intriguing and perhaps even as controversial as *Against the Grain*. One is a documentary collaboration with two other female filmmakers in Europe, focusing on questions of race and diversity in a post-Obama era. Kaneko is also working on an independent feature film centered on a man who is squatting in his own foreclosed home. And if that's not enough, Kaneko is collaborating on an installation with a Berlin-based artist about the memories associated with moving an entire home. In between working on her various film projects, Kaneko also teaches at the Art Institute in Hollywood, Calif.

While Kaneko emphasizes that documentary filmmaking is an arduous process and that it is statistically more difficult for female directors to survive in an all-boys club, she is drawn to the pursuit of documentaries because "you're engaged with real people in the real world," she says. Kaneko stresses to her students that "while learning the programs and technology are important in filmmaking, you have to have something to say." Clearly evident in her films and artistic endeavors, Kaneko pursues issues that some would stay away from, but as she's learned, sometimes taking to the streets can help you find what you're looking for. ☈