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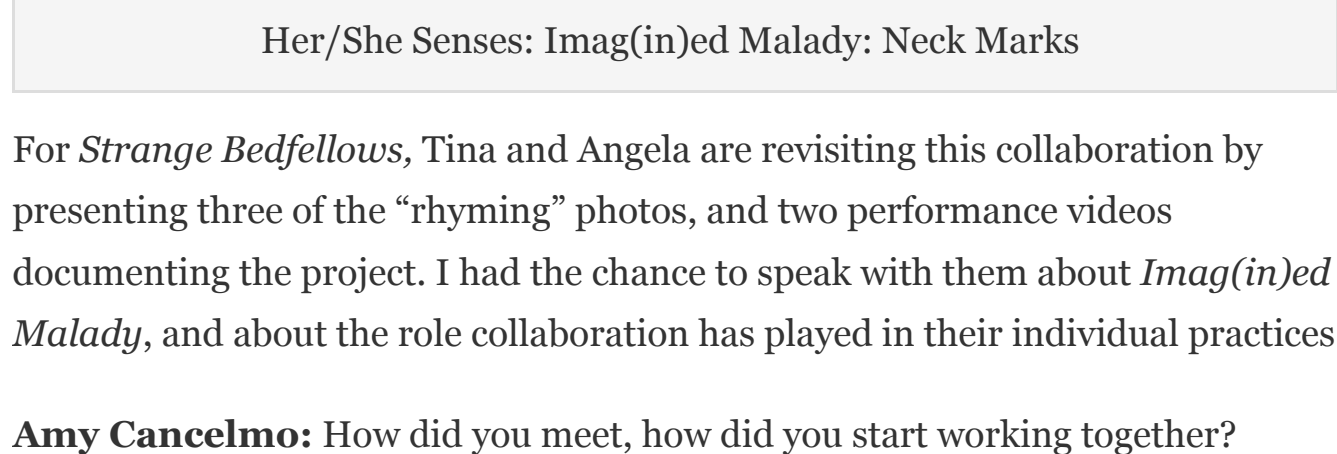
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Her/She Senses: a Curator's Interview with Angela Ellsworth & Tina Takemoto

Tina Takemoto and Angela Ellsworth met in 1991 while pursuing graduate degrees at Rutgers University. Within their first year of school, they began performing together under the name *Her/She Senses* in projects exploring feminist and anti racist politics through absurd and often comedic performances.

When Angela was diagnosed with [Hodgkins Lymphoma](#) in 1993, they began a project called *Imag(in)ed Malady*. At this time, the artists were living in different cities, so in order to share the experience, and understand it more fully herself, Angela began sending Tina photos documenting the effects of treatment on her body. Tina began staging "rhyming" photographs of her own body in staged recreations of Angela's photos.

The mirroring photographs began as a way for both artists to try to understand the confusing dynamics of a sick/well experience, but when Ellsworth's cancer went into remission, the parameters of the project became unclear and Takemoto's trauma manifested in physical harm to herself. In a photograph she intended to "rhyme" with Ellsworth's blown veins from chemotherapy, Takemoto taped five matches to her arm and lit them one by one. The experience landed her in the emergency room, and complicated continuation of the project.



Her/She Senses: Imag(in)ed Malady: Neck Marks

For *Strange Bedfellows*, Tina and Angela are revisiting this collaboration by presenting three of the "rhyming" photos, and two performance videos documenting the project. I had the chance to speak with them about *Imag(in)ed Malady*, and about the role collaboration has played in their individual practices.

Any Canelmo: How did you meet, how did you start working together?

Tina Takemoto: We met in 1991 in graduate school at [Rutgers University](#), which had quite a feminist orientation at the time. We met as painters— somewhat closeted painters—since it seemed pretty unliky to engage in the male-dominated, unique-object-producing, genius-myth-generating practice of painting. I think we initially bonded over our bad-practice choice.

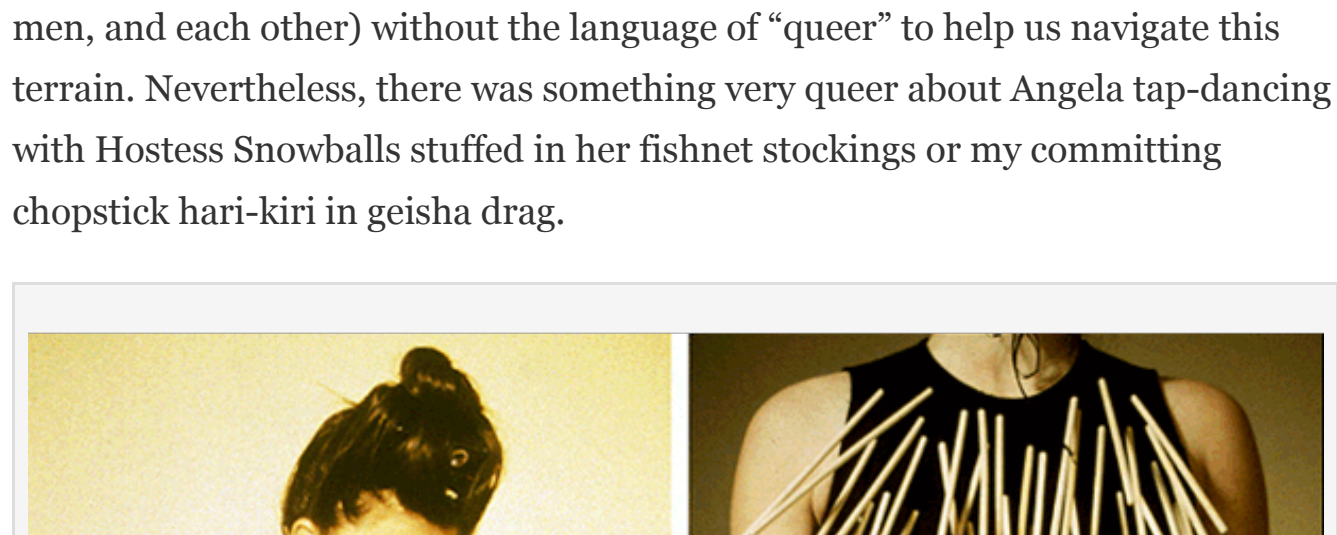
Angela Ellsworth: Within the first year, we started performing together under the name *Her/She Senses* (initially with [Jennifer Parkes](#)). Eventually, Tina and I co-organized For-Play, a monthly live art event featuring time-based performances by students and local artists.

AC: Tell me a little bit about the ethos at Rutgers at that time. It sounds like it was a really interesting time where performance and Fluxus art was intermingling with queer politics.



TF: In the early 1990s, Rutgers had a lot going on in terms of art, identity, and politics. The work of ACT-UP, the Women's Action Coalition (WAC), and [identity politics](#) all informed our thinking at the time. Many of our mentors (including [Martha Rosler](#), Joan Semwill, Emma Amos, and [Geoffrey Hendricks](#)) were challenging notions of representation and power as well as engaging in art as everyday life.

AE: I didn't really think of what was happening as queer Fluxus. I would say that performance and queer politics were happening alongside feminist and activist art practices.

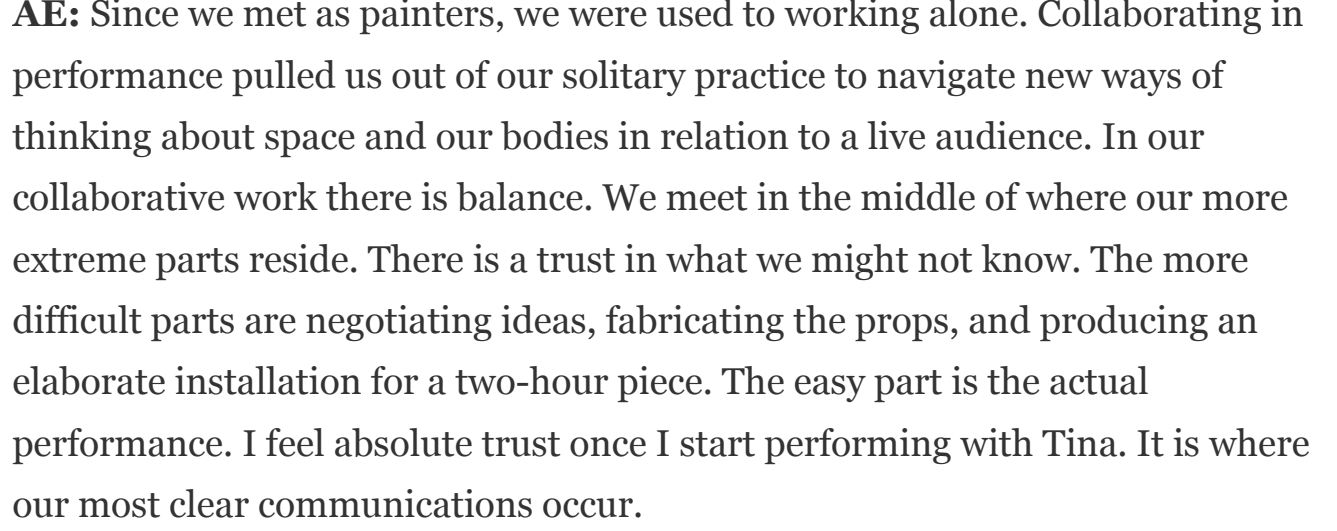


Her/She Senses: Misfit Attire

AC: Fluxus art is interesting to me in relation to the idea of "queer" art. In a sense, the concept of estrangement (*ostrannenie*) that Brecht talked about is the making strange, the queering of everyday occurrence. Can you talk a little bit about where queerness or queering shows up in your work, and what that means to you?

AE: I like the idea of "queering the everyday." In retrospect, I think our work was very queer, although I am not sure that we were totally conscious of it at the time.

TF: We knew that our work was feminist and anti-racist, but I think in our own lives we were still working though the multiplicities of our desires (for women, men, and each other) without the language of "queer" to help us navigate this terrain. Nevertheless, there was something very queer about Angela tap-dancing with Hostess Snowballs stuffed in her fishnet stockings or my committing chopstick kari-kiri in geisha drag.



Her/She Senses: Misfit Attire

AC: Collaborative practice, like Fluxus, intentionally positions itself in radical opposition to commodification, and traditional concepts of authorship and identity. Because you both work experimentally, identify as queer and work in performance, which is often associated with those conundrums as well, do you think it's easier for you to work collaboratively?

AE: Since we met as painters, we were used to working alone. Collaborating in performance pulled us out of our solitary practice to navigate new ways of thinking about space and our bodies in relation to a live audience. In our collaborative work there is balance. We meet in the middle of where our more extreme parts reside. There is a trust in what we might not know. The more difficult parts are negotiating ideas, fabricating the props, and producing an elaborate installation for a two-hour piece. The easy part is the actual performance. I feel absolute trust once I start performing with Tina. It is where our most clear communications occur.

TF: I agree. For me, brainstorming with Angela is the most exciting, frustrating, and hilarious part of the process. We usually start with a set of ideas. For example, in [Caféline and Cartridge](#), our point of departure was carrots, coffee, and medical equipment. Next, we spend hours developing ideas for gestures, actions, props and sets. Angela tends to focus on the overall visual impact guided by the philosophy that "more props + more materials = more fabulous!" I'm usually in charge of the nuts-and-bolts approach to making it all work within our limited budget and DIY aesthetic.

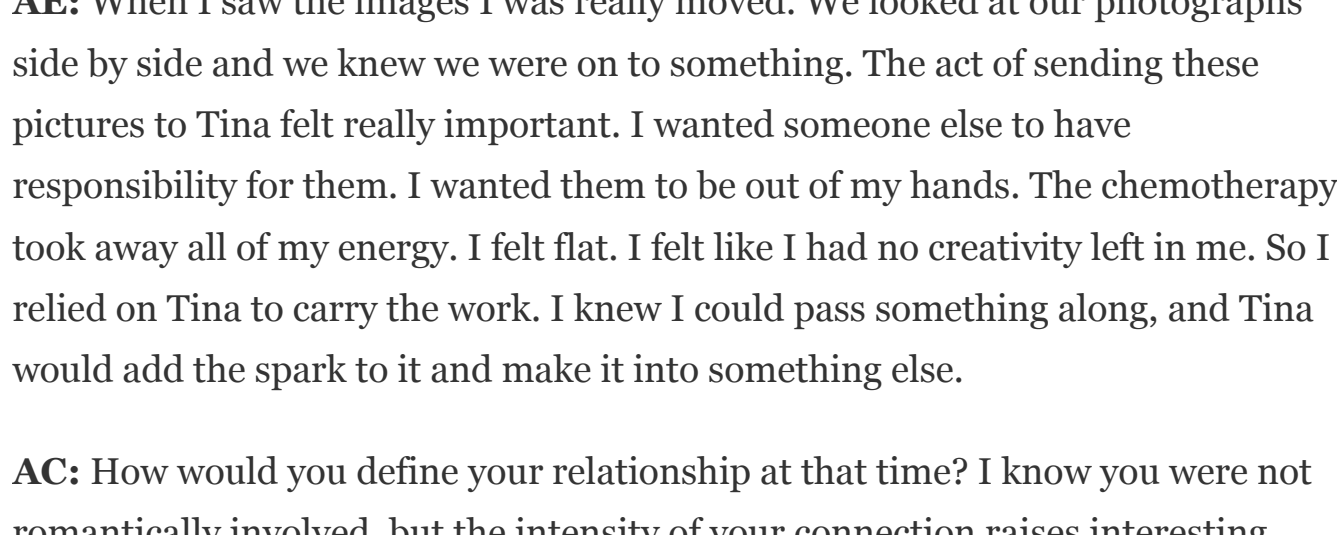
AC: Is it possible to ever be the single author of a piece?

AE: Most of my solo performance work involves other bodies, sometimes as many as 14 performers. Regardless of performing with other bodies, there are always many influences and supportive people around a production so single authorship seems like a strange notion. Single authorship is more for institutional needs and an outside desire to label something.

AC: Tell me a little about the beginnings of *Imag(in)ed Malady*, and how the rhyming photos began.

TF: When Angela was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, she was living to [Phoenix, Arizona](#) to be closer to her family and I was doing doctoral work in upstate [New York](#). She started sending me stacks of photographs that she took at the hospital during various cancer treatments as well as at home as she noticed various changes with her body.

AE: In the beginning, I didn't know anything about cancer or chemotherapy, I thought, "I'm going to be throwing up, I'm going to get really skinny, and I'm going to be bald." The photographs were a way of visualizing the fact that illness was happening. It was as if I needed to prove even to myself that I was sick. There was something important about seeing myself in these images—seeing my body changing and thinking about what others might be seeing when they looked at me.



Imag(in)ed Malady: Blue Feet

TF: After Angela started sending me these photographs, I started restaging her photographs using everyday objects on my body as a way of reimagining or "rhyming" her medical images. I was acutely aware that my pictures could never capture the gravity of her cancer experience. Instead I tried to create images that could resemble or mimic her scars or sores, but in a clearly makeshift manner that emphasized the impossibility of producing an "adequate" visual equivalent.

AE: When I saw the images I was really moved. We looked at our photographs side by side and we knew we were on to something. The act of sending these pictures to Tina felt really important. I wanted someone else to have responsibility for them. I wanted them to be out of my hands. The chemotherapy took away all of my energy. I felt flat. I felt like I had no creativity left in me. So I relied on Tina to carry the work. I knew I could pass something along, and Tina would add the spark to it and make it into something else.

AC: How would you define your relationship at that time? I know you were not romantically involved, but the intensity of your connection raises interesting questions about queer relationships not fitting into clearly defined categories.

AE: Tina was my connection to a creative practice and a world I was familiar with. Our collaboration was a key support system in my experience inside and outside a "sick" world. Although Tina and I were not lovers in a traditional sense, our work was being funded for most recognized work we had done up to that point. When Tina visited across the US, she often visited me in Arizona and became the custodian for memories, artifacts, and exchanges within *Her/She Senses*. Tina encouraged actions that pushed the work beyond our intimate experience of illness towards other audiences. When we circulated our visual rhymes as postcards, we reached new audiences. New audiences included immediate family, uncles, cousins, hematologist and oncology doctors, technicians at radiation clinics, and nurse practitioners who received our monthly mailings. Tina encouraged an artistic exchange around illness that was "a project." Seeing what I was going through as a "project" positioned me in a place I understood. I didn't have a solo practice during my illness. My energy was put into and kept up by the collaboration with Tina.

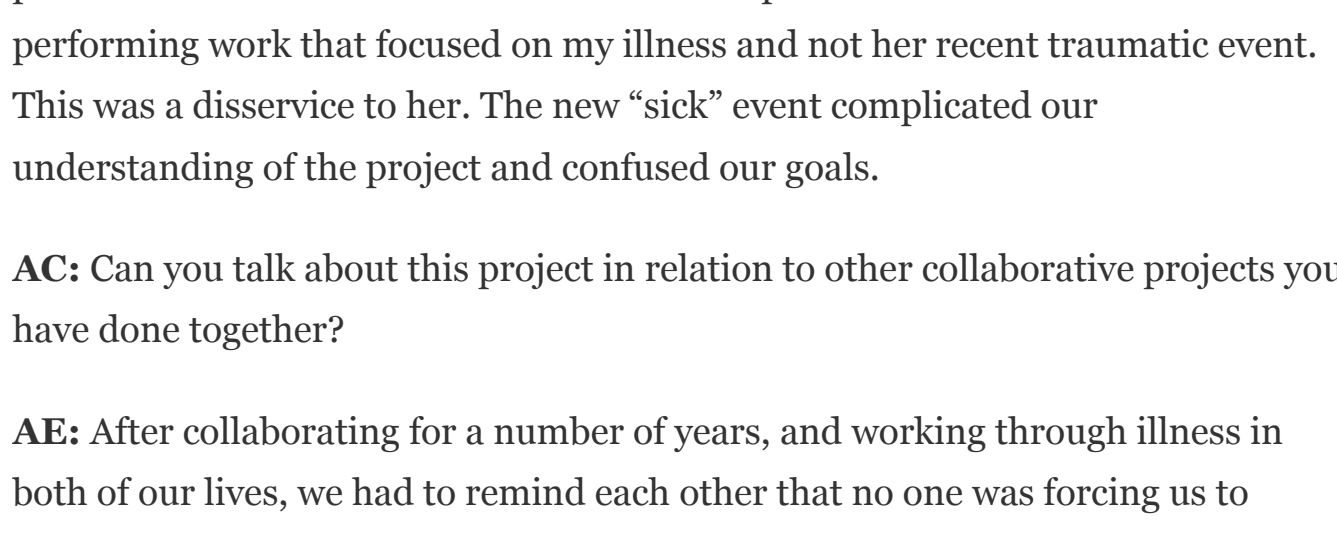
AC: I read the project *Imag(in)ed Malady* as an expression of empathy, both cognitive and emotional. The trauma of Angela's illness obviously was affecting both of you in very intense and very different ways. Can you talk a little about the concept of empathy in relation to this project?

TF: Looking back, I would say that *Imag(in)ed Malady* offered a way of expressing empathy, trauma, and grief in a direct and indirect manner. There was a feeling of urgency around Angela's illness. In an irration way, I thought if the visual rhymes continued to be "good" and our performances continued to be successful then, of course, our work would lead to her health and recovery.

AE: Ultimately, I believe that making the images and performing together really did lead to my health. My experience with cancer was being heard and seen. It made it seem worthwhile because my experience became much more than just this awful personal ordeal that I was trying to endure. During that time, my relationship to my family was pretty strained and complicated. But in our collaboration, I was supported and I didn't feel forgotten.

AC: I'm interested in the way that this project it brings to light the confusing dynamics of a sick/well experience, and how the dominance of one person's needs in collaboration can be catastrophic. I read an interview in which you both talk about the benefits of your collaboration, and also the damaging effect that the end of the project had on Tina. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

TF: Shortly after Angela got news that her cancer was in remission, she went on a trip to Italy. I was elated for her but also worried that she might get sick while she was away. This was before cell phones or email, and it was the first time we would be out of contact for many weeks. After she left the country, I couldn't stop myself from imagining and generating the visual rhymes. The images in my head were becoming increasingly graphic and extreme. Ultimately, I ended up taping five matches to my right arm and burning them as an attempt to rhyme her blown veins from chemotherapy. I had to go to the emergency room and almost ended up in the psych ward. My first thought was, "Oh no, I totally screwed up. I really failed Angela and our project." Thinking back, perhaps it makes sense that I had an emotional breakdown while we were out of touch. All my fear and anxiety over Angela's illness and the possibility of losing her was always present and driving the work, but never could be openly acknowledged. Angela's health and her physical distance gave me a space to experience the gravity of these emotions.



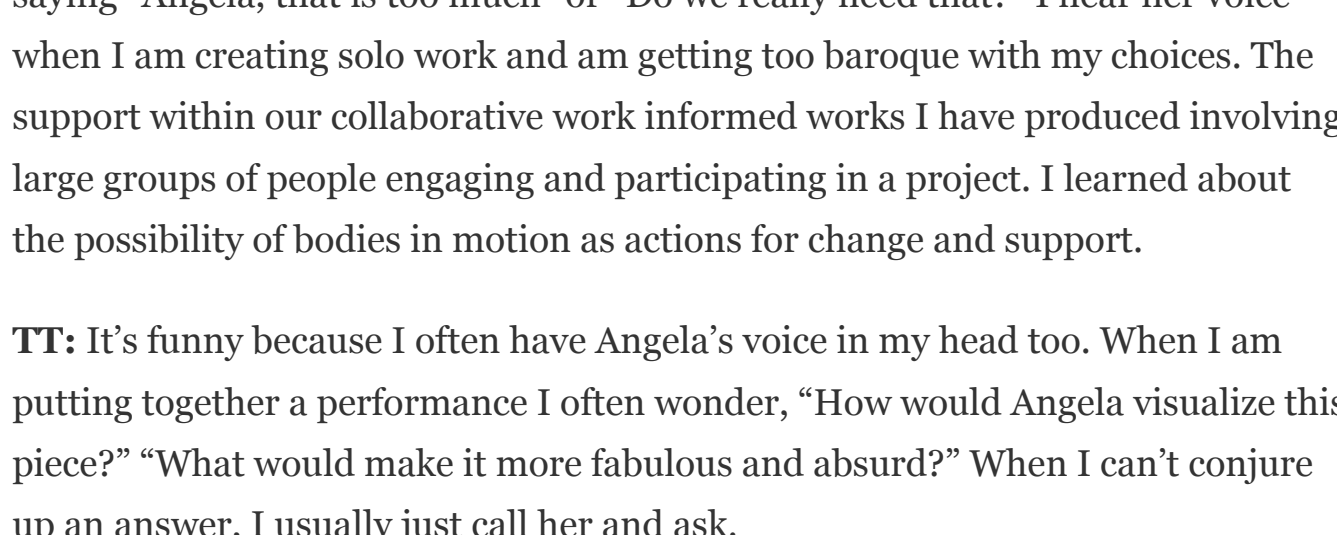
Arm's Length

AE: I think that everything went haywire because there was too much focus on me. Even though the premise of our work was about the interrelationship between a person who is sick and a person who is well, we only focused on my experience of being sick. We were not addressing how it was affecting Tina. At the same time, there was a point where I just didn't want to be sick anymore or always positioned in the sick role. I take responsibility for keeping myself in the "sick" role, but Tina also played a part. Even after my cancer was in remission, our work was being funded for most recognized work we had done up to that point. When Tina burned her arm it was complicated because we were performing work that focused on my illness and not her recent traumatic event. This was a disservice to her. The new "sick" event complicated our understanding of the project and confused our goals.

AC: Can you talk about this project in relation to other collaborative projects you have done together?

AE: After collaborating for a number of years, and working through illness in both of our lives, we had to remind each other that no one was forcing us to continue to collaborate or work on illness. When we hit a moment in the collaboration when stress started to override the invigorating and encouraging aspects of our collaboration, we had to address it. We decided to work on *Miming the Masters*, a series of campy art historical remakes that would revive our previous interest in humor and absurdity.

TF: In our homage to Bernini's *St Teresa of Avila in Ecstasy*, Angela appears as the dazzling mystic singing "You Light Up My Life" as I plunge arrows into her strap-on heart while dressed as her orientalist angel.



Her/She Senses: Erotto Electric

AE: We continued working on this series for a number of years. Our intention was to have a trilogy, but we only completed two pieces. Perhaps we needed to start focusing more fully on our own projects.

AC: How would you say that the experience of *Imag(in)ed Malady* has influenced your individual work, or collaborations with other artists?

AE: We have a good balance in our collaboration. What I learned formally in the collaboration with Tina continues to resonate in my own work. I often hear Tina saying "Angela, that is too much" or "Do we really need that?" I hear her voice when I am creating solo work and am getting too baroque with my choices. The support within our collaborative work informed works I have produced involving large groups of people engaging and participating in a project. I learned about the possibility of bodies in motion as actions for change and learned.

TF: It's funny because I often have Angela's voice in my head too. When I am putting together a performance I often wonder, "How would Angela visualize this piece?" "What would make it more fabulous and absurd?" When I can't conjure up an answer, I usually just call her and ask.

AC: What are you working on now?

AE: Since 2008, I have been working on [The Phurid Wife Project](#) which navigates issues of the body in relation to gender, sexuality, and cultural history of the western United States through sculptural objects and performance. The work is embedded in excavating my personal history to understand my queer identity as an extension of homosocial communities established by my ancestors. As a fourth-generation Mormon, my ancestors were some of the earliest Mormons to pioneer the west. They were prophets and poetesses who spoke in tongues, lived within the construct of polygamy, and practiced mystical aspects of Mormonism. Focusing on sister-wives as a point of departure for discussing contemporary issues around non-heteronormative relationships, I reimagine this community of women with their own visionary and revelatory powers, as they pioneer new personal histories.

TF: I am also working on a queer historical project, [Looking for Jiro](#) is a queer meditation on the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. As a fourth generation Japanese American, I grew up hearing family stories about camp, but no one ever mentioned the LGBT experience of imprisonment. My recent work is inspired by Jiro Omuma, a gay immigrant who worked in the prison mess hall and liked muscular men. How did this dandy gay Issei bachelor from San Francisco survive the isolation, humiliation, and homophobia of imprisonment? My project includes a queer musical mash-up video features drag king performance, U.S. propaganda footage, muscle building, and homoerotic bread making.

[More about Tina Takemoto](#)
[More about Angela Ellsworth](#)

For more information on *Imag(in)ed Malady* see Tina Takemoto, "Love/Sick: A Conversation with Angela Ellsworth," *Theatre Survey* 53: 1 (April 2012), pp. 105-114.

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