

WEBINAR SUMMARY:

Artist Talk: Daisuke Kosugi in conversation with Benjamin Cook

Tuesday 7 June 2022

Benjamin Cook: I'm really happy to be joining Daisuke today here. He's an artist whose work I've been following for a while now, so it's a real privilege. Thank you to Daiwa for inviting me. Today I'm going to talk about the work in the exhibition and then we'll kind of expand outwards from there. So Daisuke, could we start by perhaps talking about the gestation of these works. Perhaps we could start with 'All That Goes Before Forget'. Actually you could start by talking about the title.

Daisuke Kosugi: The title, 'All That Goes Before Forget' comes from the first sentence of short prose called 'Enough' by Samuel Beckett. It's not that this work was inspired by this short prose, but while I was working with this film, the narration of this personal traumatic story was similar to his texts. Samuel Beckett wrote this short prose in the French first, and he always had these formalistic challenges. In this case he tried to write it's like a personal narrative from one sentence, so it's like a first person narration, but because of this linguistic technique he used, the reader is unaware if the main person is female or male, which I guess is really difficult to do in the French. After that, he translated that text into English, and then from my understanding, he had a different challenge because in English, gender doesn't really matter. So I think formalistically, it was really difficult to have the whole picture of what's going on. I found it similar to the film as the title 'All That Goes Before Forget' has two different meanings. I thought it was really fitting with my work.

Benjamin Cook: Could you perhaps talk about the themes of the film? You mentioned PTSD in the text about the work.

Daisuke Kosugi: There's two ways of explaining it. Firstly, I've been interested in this since 2015, after I read the book called 'The Body in the Pain' by Elaine Scarry. This book is a kind of analysis about the linguistic agency in the notion of pain. She argued that pain doesn't have a felt experience; pain doesn't have a language. I was interested in this experience which hasn't yet had language, but representation of pain exists all over the media, literature, you know, photography, and so on. From there, I was also interested in trauma, because trauma is quite a complex thing. There's also lots of film and literature and documentaries that deal with trauma.

In 2018, I did an interview with my grandma about her traumatic experiences. She told me this story when she was when I was really young, I think perhaps six or so. I was able to really visualize this scene. I wanted to check if I remembered this story correctly, and that I hadn't exaggerated it in my head. The most interesting thing was this anecdote that she told me. 50 years after World War II ended, a local high school did this project where they interviewed the older generation who experienced the work and published it. It's sort of a living testimony. For me, I found that project quite important because although there are many similar projects, for instance the Peace Museum in Hiroshima, where there is a video archive of individual testimonies, somehow, in my grandma's case, no one in her area wanted to talk about their traumatic memories. So in the end, this publication was cancelled. That was my starting point, about survivors not wanting to recall the memory, not wanting to talk about the memory. Through that, I kind of understood that perhaps the current depiction of trauma focuses on what happened in the incident and the violence the survivor went through. But perhaps survivors want to talk more about their survival, how they're still living, so that's how they carry the memory and how they're still fighting the memory.

So with 'All That Goes Before Forget', I consciously took out all the traumatic scenes about the incident itself, but I only described the build up to the trauma sequence. Perhaps that fits better with how everyone with PTSD remembers things. They remember more linearly how the incident happened, but not the incident itself. Because during the incident, they had a flight and fight response, so that amygdala kicked in and all the details are kind of everywhere. In a way fragmented, but really detailed and strongly connected the feeling of fear. So that's what I did with the film.

Benjamin Cook: There's this kind of indefinability about time and culture across the film as well, it's happening in play. It's obviously happening in different times and places, but there's a certain kind of elliptical quality to that. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that.

Daisuke Kosugi: My process usually starts with really personal intimate conversations with real people's testimony in a sense. I didn't really curate the connection of each story. I didn't try to find a story that relates and then go to the subject. It's more like through my life, these kinds of conversations happen. There were three scenes. The first one is a Japanese teenage girl in a bomb shelter, and that is inspired by the story of my grandma. The other one is a war child. During the Nazi occupation in Norway, some women had romantic relationships with the German soldiers. In Europe, it was an international phenomenon; after the Nazis went back, these women were shamed and hidden away in society. Then that shame and punishment goes to the child. I happen to know a person who grew up as a war child. The last one is a more contemporary setting in the bathroom, which is more of a collage of my personal experiences, but also someone who experienced domestic abuse. Often, in these cases,

the bathroom becomes quite an important place where the victim or survivor can be alone without having any suspicion from the offender. That's why I chose that location.

Benjamin Cook: When we met up, the other day, you were talking about quite an interesting writing process that you have around translating, which just made me think when you were talking about the Samuel Beckett, just there, about this kind of writing process that we have. I think you said you write in Japanese, and then you translate. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that kind of writing process.

Daisuke Kosugi: Since my education happened in Norway, I feel like the way of creating narratives was from Western discourse. But at the same time, English is not my mother tongue. When I write, I have big ideas in English. Then when I get in the writing mode, I write everything in Japanese. Without thinking about grammar, just like machine guns. Then from there, I translate my Japanese texts into English and I think more about the grammar; whether I will tell this story through the first person, or third person, for example. That's similar to the filmmaking process. I never bring someone from production to post-production. It's only me who's in the connection. Of course what happens during filming is really exciting and engaging, but also intimate at the same time. In the editing period, instead of remembering how I felt during shooting, I need to see what the image is. I need the editor to help switch my mind. The first week of the editing process, we just watch all of the footage without cutting anything, to see the quality of each take.

Benjamin Cook: The other thing I really noticed about was the attentiveness to gesture. I wonder if you could say something about that. Particularly like working with actors. This focus on gestures. Hand movements and things like that.

Daisuke Kosugi: I studied about the memory mechanism, the amygdala kicking in, how that all works. It's really interesting that when you're in fight or flight mode, the amygdala tries to record everything, your surroundings, all the details, so they can perhaps use it later. So the details and all the small gestures became really important, and significant, even though it's not the main thing. So I had this image about detail. How to somehow describe the scene without showing an overview, but only the details.

How I wrote the narrative and how I shot it was really interesting. First, before editing everything, me and the editor set each story into one chunk. So it was three chunks. In the bathroom setting, it's more of a contemporary cinema aesthetic. The close up, changing the focus, the camera panning. I also tried to mimic real time in a contemporary sense. But with the footage of the war child, I noticed everything

was one tempo off. One action, then it's shown. I think it's more common in films from the sixties and fifties. It dramatises it. There's a different tempo of action.

Benjamin Cook: In terms of another characteristic of both of the films is a certain kind of coolness and distance. I wonder if perhaps you could talk about that kind of intention or maybe the effective intention of the film.

Daisuke Kosugi: I don't really know how to answer that question because I think the coolness and distance is something more like an interpretation. When I make films, I don't think about how it will be interpreted, it's more about my image, and how I remember things.

Benjamin Cook: Maybe this is just my experience of it. Almost like an observed distance.

Daisuke Kosugi: I guess I like to observe things. Another thing before I forget is about the voiceover. The voiceover sets a certain premise of the film. The voiceover folds everything in, they talk about their experiences. In the flashback, they talk in the present sense, but often the image is in the past. Perhaps that creates some distance.

I was also interested in suspense. If the subject is going to experience something violent then usually films build up the suspense, and perhaps it's because the film director wants the viewer to engage in the present time, not knowing what's going to happen. However, I was more interested in the fear of the present time, remembering that moment, and how the suspense kicks in. The past itself has already happened, so the viewer is not so afraid of what happens in the scene, but perhaps suspense or fear is more built up in terms of how they would feel about that.

Benjamin Cook: I suppose the other sense of coolness is coming from the aesthetic of the film, it feels like there's a certain kind of muted-ness to the color. Is that also about this sense of distance of time?

Daisuke Kosugi: With other films, I wanted to go with more muted, pastel colours to make it more of a flat image, and almost like they're daydreaming. But with 'All That Goes Before Forget', we tried to have more saturation, and make it quite dark. It might be something to do with light in Norway. We don't get much light. Everything is a bit more muted.

Benjamin Cook: Perhaps we could go on to talk about 'A False Weight' now. Could you talk a little bit about the gestation of that project, how it kind of started?

Daisuke Kosugi: Before 'A False Weight', I made a documentary called 'Meeting Uncle Yuji'. I really enjoyed working in a documentary style. I got permission to make more work from Laura Herman about how we understand architecture in a new way. I was thinking about making a documentary

about my father because it was 2017, right after my father got diagnosed with the PSP, which is similar to Parkinson's disease. It's basically a brain disease, where you slowly start losing brain cells, and in his case, he also lost mobility. He worked his whole life as a building engineer and architect, so he had a mindset where every decision should be rational and effective. After he retired, he started doing bodybuilding, and he controlled his every day routine, his diet, training: everything to reach the idealistic body in a sense. But after he started feeling symptoms of PSP, he couldn't make sense of it because what happened was his brain was not sending signals in a normal way. I wanted to make a documentary about his struggle with his lack of language. It was connected to what I was interested in, the lack of language in pain. However, he didn't want to be filmed when he was sick, but he was fine with showing footage of his bodybuilding. So that was the premise.

I needed someone or something to kind of show his presence, and that's why I asked a butoh dancer, Toru Iwashita, to re-enact my father's everyday routine, so that I was able to show my father's everyday routine, so that we can have this conversation. Toru is a butoh dancer, but he identifies more with improvised dance, so he has been doing improv sessions with patients in hospitals since the 1980s. I thought perhaps Toru can communicate with my father not through the language my father has, which is more like sports-type, scientific way, but somehow bodily, some sort of language that butoh practice. So I hired my father as an acting director, and we started shooting, while we always had a second camera filming the documentary. After all the filming was done, it was a 10 day session, we actually filmed in my parents apartment. I was planning to rent out a similar apartment, but it was tricky to move him around, so in the end we decided that we should film it in their home. That was also quite challenging. We would come at 8 in the morning, set up all the lighting, clean up, and then we would shoot all day, and then at around 6, we would take everything down, and make it so that my parents could live normally. It was a really intense, but also engaging week. There was so much footage of family reunions, emotional moments, and the friendship between Toru and my father. But in the end, I had to cut everything out because I found that these scenes had a really beautiful quality. Whenever I tried to break the fourth wall by showing some footage of my father and Toru talking or somehow trying to suggest this is reenacted somehow, it killed everything. So in the end, it became only with reenactment.

Benjamin Cook: That's really interesting. Could you say something a bit more about why you particularly chose somebody that practiced butoh, perhaps some people here don't know why that is exactly. Is there some significance to that in terms of that particular practice in relation to that reenactment?

Daisuke Kosugi: When I work with actors usually I don't like to use people who have a certain way of doing it. If they come from a theatre background, they often have a specific and a theatrical projection

of the voice and theatrical acting. I usually try to use someone who is good at improvising. Butoh dance is an avant-garde dance that happened in post-war Japan. It started as avant-garde, but I feel like nowadays it has become more traditional. People have tried to keep it and preserve it as the original school of butoh. In the traditional sense, people say that Western dance creates one dance out of ten dancers. Everything's about perfection, but butoh dance is perhaps the opposite. For example, when teaching how to move your arms, instead of describing the angle, they talk more about interpretation. I liked this teaching, because somehow the teaching of butoh already includes communication. Everyone projects their way of thinking through their movement. There's no "correct" way of doing butoh, and I think that's why I chose a butoh dancer.

During the filming session, I didn't let Toru dance at all, and he really wanted to because he wanted to show butoh dance to my father. During the filming, we booked a community hall in the apartment complex, and we made a stage, and Toru did an improvised dance about his experience through this filming. It was a really beautiful dance, but I could see there was also a brutality, and I didn't want to have that in the film. That's why in the film, it was always interesting to work with someone who has so much skill and experience but at the same time not let them do that, and try to do something else.

Benjamin Cook: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the cut-time sense in the film because you know it's a longer, slower film. I wanted to know what your thinking was in terms of that time sense that you were creating. What were your intentions?

Daisuke Kosugi: Some people may have noticed that the structure in my film is very similar to Chantal Akerman's film, 'Jeanne Dielman'. That film portrays a single mum in Brussels, who has a very strict daily routine, and slowly that routine collapses. In the end, there is a build up of suspense, and then violence- that's a quick way of describing it. I really enjoyed the film, and it was a really interesting experience remembering what you had seen, to see the difference. That coincided with my own experience with my father, every time I met up with him, I was constantly comparing how he used to be. The way the narrative was written followed my own experience of looking at him. I was interested in using this structure of careful observation, and building suspense, to create certain empathy or more understanding, rather than end in dramatic violence.

The film is split into three sections. The first phase is when he doesn't have any symptoms, so he has his normal routine of eating protein and going to work out and so on. The , second phase is when his daily routine starts becoming difficult for him, because he begins to feel his symptoms. The third phase is about his acceptance of his symptoms. He has to adapt, and change his routine. Time-wise, the first phase is 10 minutes, the second phase is eight minutes, and the third phase is 30 minutes. But from my experience, the first phase feels so slow because you really don't know why you're looking at this boring

routine. But in the third phase, from my personal experience, things are so intense and intimate that you kind of forget the time, and that's interesting.

Benjamin Cook: As an artist that's existing across a number of different countries and contexts, I wonder how much the context of the first presentation of a work shapes that work, in terms of your thinking. The difference between the first presentation of a work in Japan versus the first presentation of a work in Norway or something. How much does that shape your decisions about the work? I think we have that kind of sense that films that just feel are quite hermetic. They can kind of move around, but I guess you know you're working across quite distinctive cultural contexts.

Daisuke Kosugi: Before I started working more exclusively, I always tried to work with context. But now I try to not think about context, because I feel like moving images have different lifetimes, than for example commissioned installation. 'A False Weight' was first commissioned in the context of architecture. It was like a trilogy, three artists making different work, and then I was the last one. The first one was a more direct connection with architecture. The second was a bit more abstract, and mine didn't talk about the context of architecture. It talked more about the body, but somehow it worked well in this context. When I showed this film in Japan, it was more about the body. 'All That Goes Before Forget' was commissioned by Volt, a curator-run project, in Bergen. It was a newly commissioned solo exhibition, so there was almost no context; I could just show whatever I was working on. It was then shown in the Momentum biennial in Norway. It then had a different context. Then it went to Tokyo together with 'A False Weight'. And as you see in the Daiwa Foundation, the same combination.

I was curious about how it would change, because in the Contemporary Museum Tokyo, even though my work was in a pair, there were other artists' work that connected with this idea of the body. But in the Daiwa Foundation, there's more of a juxtaposition between these two films. I feel like all of my work often has several angles to approach and any context I put it in somehow, it reacts differently.

Benjamin Cook: Why do you work with moving images? What place does it occupy within your practice? Why are you drawn to it?

Daisuke Kosugi: A quick answer to this is because I'm exposed to moving images all over the place - screens, my mobile phone, et cetera. Maybe if I lived in a different time, I would've been a painter.

Benjamin Cook: I just want to thank Daisuke for the conversation. Thank you, everybody for watching.