

WEBINAR SUMMARY:

Memories of War

Discussion with Gill Webber, Meiro Koizumi and Sayuri Kose,
moderated by Jonathan Watkins

Friday 7 November 2025

Discussion led by Jonathan Watkins:

Jonathan Watkins: How nice to be here in such good company and to talk about something that is of particular interest to me, being the son of somebody who fought in the Second World War. It is interesting for members of the panel to know that my father actually fought the Japanese in Burma in the 1940s. Also, like Gill, I have a connection with the Imperial War Museum. I mean, I was a trustee there, running up until the '14-18 NOW' program that is concerned with the centenary of the First World War.

Gill, I thought I'd start with you because you've been working with the Imperial War Museum for a number of years. This is an institution which is concerned with memories of war and communicating memories of war, and I wondered if you could share with us some general observations that you'd make on the subject.

Gill Webber: Yes, absolutely. I feel like I spent most of my time at IWM. I was there for nine years as the Executive Director of Programming, obviously dealing with some very challenging and also sensitive subjects, and the challenge was quite often how to tell those stories in a way that was accessible to a contemporary audience. As you said in your introduction, one of the key things I wanted to do was to broaden that audience, to get people who maybe didn't already come to the IWM very often, or even people who felt that war wasn't a subject that they were particularly interested in. How do you reach those people who wouldn't automatically think, yes, it's Saturday, I'll go along to an exhibition at a war museum or, in other media, read a long article about war: those are the people that you really want to reach. I spent, I think, the entirety of my nine years at Imperial War Museums trying out different ways of reaching people like that, while still being sensitive, of course, to the subject matter, and we can maybe expand on this and talk about this in more detail, particularly with my colleagues on the panel. But using different techniques: we used theatre, we used broadcast, we used music, we used academic research. There were all of these different ways of reaching an audience and engaging an audience who might not have, in the first instance, thought that they were interested.

The other big theme of my approach was to use current affairs. Current affairs is what I'm interested in, and I feel very firmly that you cannot understand the world as it is today in the world that we live in unless you understand your history and understand how we got here. I think for an awful lot of people, it was current affairs that was like the way into the subject matter. So how do we make this story relevant to people's lives today? Using that as the starting point of the way into telling the story was also really key.

Jonathan Watkins: Prior to your experience at the Imperial War Museum, was this an interest that you brought to it? I mean, was it your interest in war and memories of war as motivation, or was it your interest in museums and this happened to be the subject matter? Or was it a bit of both?

Gill Webber: Actually, I've never worked in a museum before I worked at IWM. So I've worked very broadly in the culture and heritage sector. I started off with 10 years at BBC in current affairs and news. So, as I say, it was really the contemporary issues that were the way in for me, and also storytelling.

In terms of my background, I started off working in communications and marketing, and so the whole of my background was storytelling, understanding audiences, and how to reach them. When I started work at IWM, it was a challenge. These are difficult and sensitive stories to tell. They're very multifaceted. So, to me, the attraction was the challenge of telling those stories which I felt were important as well. I've always been very interested in contributing something, I suppose, and enabling difficult stories to tell that matter. I saw working at Imperial War Museums as a challenge in terms of the subject matter. How do you tell these incredible stories that really matter today and are still so relevant today to a wider audience? That's what attracted me to it.

Jonathan Watkins: What surprised me too, and defied expectation was the nature of the institution. When you tell people that you're working with the Imperial War Museum, they assume that you have some obsession with war, and maybe almost in an unhealthy way. But actually, I mean, it's important to stress how the Imperial War Museum, it's concerned with the past, with an idea of having some effect on the present and the future, and with an idea of the promotion of peace, rather than war.

Gill Webber: One of the things that always pleased me enormously was challenging people's expectations of the War Museum. One of the first exhibitions that I did was on peace, actually. We, unfortunately, weren't able to do this in real life, but we did a digital advertising campaign which crossed out the word war on the front of the building and substituted the word peace. We also put some daisies in the very big First World War guns that are outside of the museum, and got some amazing press coverage on that. All of these things were just to challenge people's expectations as to actually what are the stories that we tell. The stories are actually all about peace in the end; it's not the glorification of war. It's, how do we learn from the past to inform what we're doing today? Sadly, with what's going on in the world today, that couldn't be a more relevant message.

Jonathan Watkins: Now, particularly relevant is your work in and about the Middle East. Your work with respect to Syria, for example, and that part of the world, which could not be more pertinent right now. But what about Japan? Did you focus at all on Japan in your work with IWM?

Gill Webber: During the First World War centenary period, and then also we marked the end of the Second World War with a campaign which we called 'Victory 75', so obviously this was back in 2020. We did tell stories, particularly of the bombing in Nagasaki and Hiroshima as part of that. I mean, it's interesting because of course, we're talking particularly about silence as part of this webinar and how people didn't speak, and that's something that I could expand on. But actually, as part of the programming that we did for that, we had a piece called 'Voices of War', which was people talking about their experience of the atomic bomb. Obviously, some of them some years later, but we had a small gallery where people just sat and listened to a loop of authentic stories from people who had firsthand experience, describing what happened and what their memories were and how it had impacted them. It was very simple lighting within the gallery, so people could just focus on what they were hearing. We got the most incredible feedback from that experience. It was very immersive and enabled people to hear from those who were there or in the immediate aftermath as to what had happened to them.

The other piece that we did was with the artist Es Devlin, so we commissioned her to do a digital art piece which was called 'I Saw the World End', which was featured both on our website but also on the screens at Piccadilly Circus in London. Again, an incredibly powerful piece and I think that this is also really important as to how to tell these stories using art, music, and performance. These are ways to reach people and also explore the challenges and the very difficult themes that there are, rather than just a straight narrative. Particularly when you don't have the voices because people have been silent, I think that using these different ways to explore the story is really key.

Jonathan Watkins: Yes, I mean, it's something that we could talk about more, and particularly in relation to Meiro's work, but also what you've just said is a perfect segue, Sayuri, to asking you a question about firsthand accounts of experiences of war, and in particular, your grandfather. Your family comes from Nagasaki, and I know that you are very concerned to be in conversation with your grandfather to talk about his experience. Can you tell us how that went?

Sayuri Kose: My maternal grandfather is a 'hibakusha'. Currently, he is 92 years old, and when he was 12 years old, the bomb was dropped, three kilometers away from where he was, at home. His father was a doctor involved in relief activities, and I heard my grandfather also became involved in relief activities, because his primary school became one of the relief stations.

I also learned about the atomic bomb and nuclear weapons in peace classes at school from primary level in Nagasaki, but at the time, I had no idea that I was a third-generation hibakusha. When I became a newspaper reporter in 2016, I started to ask my grandfather about his experience of the bomb, but he refused, saying that he

would rather not have the attention. I was really conflicted. I wanted to pass on his memory, but he didn't want to share his story, and I still didn't know the full extent of his experience.

Jonathan Watkins: Do you think it was because he just simply wanted to put it out of his mind and try to forget, or do you think it was because, I mean, as you say, he didn't want to be the hero of some story, the central figure?

Sayuri Kose: So as I mentioned, he was involved in relief activities. My mother told me that he saw a lot of bodies, often bodies of people that he knew, and he had to burn these bodies, so it was really hard for him. I think he didn't want to speak about it, even to my mother. When I became a newspaper reporter, I began asking him, and my mother also joined this conversation because she really didn't know much about it.

Jonathan Watkins: That's very interesting. This is something we can touch on later in relation to the silence that's that's held or the information that's withheld by those first-hand witnesses, in as far as then the subsequent generation is affected by what has traumatised millions, billions of people around the world, and yet they can't understand it because it's not articulated.

So the kind of work that Jill was describing is vital for us to understand where we are now and how we and how we got here. Your work as a reporter, I know, took you to Sasebo, and that you were there and you were concerned with the air raids on Sasebo, and this is shortly before the bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. What was it that prompted you to undertake that research?

Sayuri Kose: In Nagasaki, actually, the main broadcast focused on the Nagasaki atomic bomb. But I know the air raids were everywhere. One of these cities was Sasebo. I asked my mother if she knew anything about the Sasebo air raids. My mum told me that we had a relative who was killed in the Sasebo air raids. There's a record called the 'Hino Umi', which collected all the testimonies about the Sasebo air raids. I found out that six of my relatives were killed in the Sasebo air raids. So I reached out to the people who made the record. I was curious to read the first-hand stories. The memories from the Sasebo air raids were fading, because people didn't speak about it, so I was really curious about this topic.

Jonathan Watkins: Yes, because you wrote an article on the subject of the air raids. But did you write about your grandfather? Did you subsequently publish anything, or no? It just exists as a conversation and your memory?

Sayuri Kose: Yes. I never wrote anything about my grandfather.

Jonathan Watkins: Now you're living in the Netherlands. You moved half way across the world, and you have a different geographical point of view. How is that for you? Are you maintaining your interest in memories of war?

Sayuri Kose: Yes. I want to approach this topic from a different angle. More about the atomic bomb. So currently, I'm researching prisoners of war in Nagasaki during World War Two. There were POW camps across Japan, and Nagasaki had the two of them, where prisoners come from countries such as the Netherlands and the United Kingdom as well. During an interview with families of Dutch POWs, they described the dropping of the atomic bomb as an opportunity to free prisoners of war. I had known that people expressed such views through news or books, but facing it in person, I was at a loss for words. I didn't know how to respond. Hearing that directly from them forced me to confront that complexity of memory of war.

Jonathan Watkins: And do you understand it now from both sides?

Sayuri Kose: Yeah, kind of. I still don't know the answer, but I'm researching.

Jonathan Watkins: And then, Meiro, the experience of, of those on the other side, of course, as a result of Japanese aggression is the subject of your work, and in particular, 'The Angels of Testimony', that was screened in Cardiff, as part of the Artist Mundi Prize. It has such resonance in this part of the world, but on the other hand, for a Japanese audience as well, quite a shocking work of art. Could you tell us what the work involved, and then what kind of impact it had?

Meiro Koizumi: So this work is called 'The Angel of Testimony', which was made in 2019, and I've been making a lot of bodies of artwork, mostly video installation work relating to the war. A lot of my work deals with how the trauma of war still exists in society, and also how this trauma was represented in society. So it's not about the past, but I'm also very much interested in how we are dealing with this part of history, and also what kind of representation we are giving to this part of history. I want to deal with this issue from the victims perspective, but also from the perspective of the perpetrator.

The Angel of Testimony is a work that I made from the perspective of perpetrators. So the Japanese as the perpetrators of the war in China and in other Asian countries. This part of history is extremely difficult to deal with in Japan, because our society itself is very intolerant, but people are particularly intolerant towards this part of history. So in general, people don't want to talk about it, and people don't like people talking about it.

Jonathan Watkins: Is it taught in schools?

Meiro Koizumi: Yes, but only briefly. But it's a super important subject. So I looked for somebody who could talk about their firsthand experience of Japanese soldiers being very cruel in Asian countries. Then we found Mr. Kondo. He was a 99-year-old war veteran, and he was deployed in China in 1940. He was there for four years, and when he was there, he experienced all sorts of things. But when he came back, he didn't talk about his experience. When he turned 70 years old in 1989, he decided to talk about his experience, which included, for example, very difficult testimony that included gang raping of women, which he participated in, as well as the

killing innocent civilians. So he talked about all these things, and there are two books published about him. We found out that he was still alive, so we approached him, but he didn't want to do any more interviews, because he was very old and frail.

But his daughter said if I still wanted to do the interview, she could lie to the hospital and take him out of the hospital, and she set up an interview for us for one hour. So I did the interview according to the book, his testimony, and then many things he's tried to narrate, but as he spoke, he was forgetting what he was saying, and there were many stories he didn't remember anymore. Towards the end of the interview, he began to sob, and he begged for forgiveness, but also said that he will never be forgiven, no matter how much he apologised, he will never be forgiven. That's what he said. It was a very moving interview.

My next step was, I had 15 young Japanese people, between the ages of 16 to 27. I asked them to memorise what's been written in his testimony, word by word. They had a choice to choose a story, and they memorised his testimony. Once they memorized it, I asked them to let these words out on the streets of Tokyo. So in the video installation, we have this video interview with these young people memorising his words. So on one screen, the man was narrating his story, but was forgetting, and on the other screen we see young people memorising his words and then letting out on the streets of Tokyo. So it's like his words lost its hosting body, but then through this whole project, you can feel that we are trying to find a new hosting body for these words to dwell and also try to find a space in contemporary Japanese society where these words are being active again.

Jonathan Watkins: These words are shocking, aren't they? I mean, what he says is it's mind-boggling, really. The other thing, of course, is that the people who are reciting these words are the same age he was when these crimes were committed.

Meiro Koizumi: Yes, it was very important that young people take these words and somehow try to embody these words. Also there's this question of whether it is really possible to do that or not? So the whole process was to try to find a way to give a new representation of history.

Jonathan Watkins: How was it for the young people?

Meiro Koizumi: Mr. Kondo's interview was so powerful and so truthful that no matter your political view, it didn't matter because the interview was so powerful that the young people really understood what the project was about, and really took it on. One of the young women picked out the story about Mr Kondo participating in the gang rape. It was one of the most shocking stories, but she picked that and she tried to memorise this story. As she memorised the story, she was identifying herself as a victim. She was naturally sympathizing with the woman, the victim of the rape. But as she was doing that, she said she couldn't go anywhere, it was too sad, too tragic, and that there was no escape. But then at one point, her performance or her reciting became something different, and we didn't understand what was happening, but it became so powerful. I asked her what happened, and she said she was identifying herself as a victim. But once she started to identify herself to Mr.

Kondo, all of a sudden she felt that she wanted to be forgiven, and she kind of showed me that that's a possibility of the perpetrator's narrative.

So with the victim's narrative, she couldn't go anywhere. But with the perpetrator's narrative, she saw this new space for wanting to be forgiven. That's what she said. Then all of a sudden, her performance became very powerful. So that was something that we learned from this process.

Jonathan Watkins: What about the audience response. How was it in Japan and how was it in this part of the world?

Meiro Koizumi: In Japan, I haven't been able to show it yet. I have been showing this work to many curators, but nobody wants to do it. That's Japan. So now I have to do it by myself. I have to find my own space to show it, and I want to do it next year.

Jonathan Watkins: Sayuri, this is interesting. I mean, do you understand that from a Japanese point of view? It seems consistent with your understanding of a Japanese approach to memories of war, particularly from the other side.

Sayuri Kose: I visited his exhibition in August in the Netherlands. I was really shocked and also overwhelmed by his work, and I really want people in Nagasaki, and the rest of Japan to see Meiro's work. I felt that his artwork traced the experience of those who lived through past events within my own mind and body somehow. Also, as someone from the younger generation, I read his testimony one sentence at a time, and I began to imagine the reasons why my grandfather chose to stay silent.

Jonathan Watkins: There's the silence of your grandfather, which is not unfamiliar. My father never really talked about his experience of fighting in Burma, and your grandfather was similarly quiet. Then there is this silencing with respect to history and a national apprehension of history, silence as far as the Japanese art establishment is concerned.

But Gill, I was thinking too, this is a work that reminds me a little bit of Jeremy Deller's work. These young people went out onto the streets of the UK and they were dressed as First World War soldiers. But they didn't say anything, did they? They were quiet. I mean, they were, to some extent, living memorials of people who had died in war. If anybody approached them, they would be given a card with details of that of that person who'd lost their lives. But they didn't say anything, and there was a silence that was absolutely crucial for the success of that work. Perhaps one of the best experiences I had as somebody working with the Imperial War Museum. Perhaps you'd like to talk about that, it's a very powerful work of art that Meiro has curated and Jeremy Deller's piece was similarly successful. Can you talk a little bit more about art, and art in relation to this whole business of silence.

Gill Webber: Jeremy Deller's piece was just incredibly powerful, wasn't it? Actually, on the theme of silence, I think part of the power of that artwork was the silence of the participants. They didn't have to tell their story. It was just the visuals that told the story. But the question of art overall and using art in that way is something that we explored a lot while I was at Imperial War Museums. I do think that art allows the audience a different way into the story, as I was saying earlier. Of course, an artist can explore a story and different perspectives of the story. In particular, as Meiro was describing, culturally sensitive parts of the story in a way that you can't just with a straight exhibition narrative.

So, another example of when we used art, you referenced the season that I did on Syria, which was back in 2016, when the war in Syria was on all the front pages of the newspapers. As part of our programming, we had an exhibition of photographs from the Russian photographer Sergei Pomenarov, and he had a particularly documentary style of photography, which was just incredibly powerful. That really told the story of what was going on in Syria from a different perspective.

We also did an art show called 'Age of Terror Art Since 9-11', which was about that Age of Terror period that we all lived in after the World Trade Center in 2001. Again, rather than having a straight exhibition narrative telling that story and what had happened since, we used contemporary artworks to explore that, which I think was much more powerful.

Another one that I'd cite, which is also about the Second World War, was 'Portraits of Holocaust Survivors'. So these were contemporary portraits; we worked with the Royal Photographic Society. They were contemporary photographs of Holocaust survivors who had settled within the UK. You might initially think that that's a challenging and depressing subject matter, but actually, it was the most powerful and uplifting exhibition. It was fantastic because, of course, it celebrated the lives that Holocaust survivors had made for themselves and their families in the UK. So I do think the power of art is just incredible in telling these sorts of stories.

Jonathan Watkins: Meiro, can you talk about that as well? I mean about your motivation, to some extent, to use artistic medium or media to convey these memories of war. I mean, it could just be the transcript of Kondo-san, that you could just distribute the book and say, listen to what this guy's got to say about his personal experience. But you have decided, I mean, not just with this work, but through your practice generally, to use other ways of communicating.

Meiro Koizumi: I agree with everything Gil said, because you described that artwork is like creating a public monument on the street, but it's more in abstract form. So, the challenge for artists is that the better the artwork is, the more chance that this part of the history will survive through time, even if it is a perpetrator's narrative. So, it's a big challenge, big responsibility, but also a great possibility for artists. It's a great subject to work with because ethically it's very important for us and also for the future.

For example, I always think about “Yukiyuki de Shingun”, it’s a documentary film by Kazuo Hara, called ‘The Emperor’s Naked Army Marches On’, it was made in 1987. It’s a masterpiece of a documentary film and deals with this part of very cruel Japanese history, World War II. Since the film is so good, such a masterpiece, since the aesthetic value of the work is so high, the story that is told in the film is extremely cruel; it’s about cannibalism during wartime. It’s very cruel, but this part of the repressed story survives through time. So that’s one great thing about art.

Also, the possibility in art, I see, is that art can deal with contradiction or complexity. As Sayuri-san described, it’s very complex. It’s not only about black and white, good and bad. It’s always this story and the story from the other side; both are authentic and both are true. That’s how we are, human beings. We are very complex. The beauty or possibility of art is that when things are complex, it is very difficult to grasp and very difficult to share because it’s this and this and very chaotic. But art is a way to kind of crystallise this complexity and make it into tangible form, so that we can share the complexity without simplifying it. I think that’s a possibility of art. So I very much have been making my artwork with this possibility.

Jonathan Watkins: Just going back to something you were saying, the difference between art and a simple relating of a narrative or a story. I’m assuming that Kondo-san’s book is available in Japan and people can go to a bookshop and buy it. But it’s your artistic response to that work that people are having difficulty with. It’s not the book and not his story, but it’s the way you have transformed it through your work that is having difficulty getting through when it comes to a Japanese art establishment.

Meiro Koizumi: Yes, I think so. For the institution, it’s more about fear of getting a backlash on social media. It’s not like an official censorship or anything, it’s more of a soft censorship of the institution, and it’s not necessarily political. It’s more that institutions are afraid of being attacked from the public through social media.

Jonathan Watkins: It’s not just Japan that has a problem in this respect; I mean, America is having considerable difficulty in this respect with respect to museums and the way they’re telling their stories, Gill. So, Gill, could you just say a little bit more about museums and how difficult it can be for them to communicate memories of war?

Gill Webber: Those cultural sensitivities are very important when you’re planning your overall programme in a museum or exhibitions programme, of course. But as I said at the beginning, one of the things that drew me to want to work in this area was to challenge that. So one of the last exhibitions that I did before I left IWM was an exhibition on sexual violence, which obviously we’ve touched on that subject as part of this discussion. One of the reasons that I felt that that was an incredibly important story to tell is because it’s largely an untold story. One of the reasons for it being an untold story, is of course cultural sensitivities; it’s a taboo subject in most cultures, I would say. But also, of course, the lack of firsthand testimony, exactly because of that taboo. So, you don’t have those voices of testimony in most cases around that subject matter, and this really is where museums can absolutely come in and contribute to storytelling in this area, because of course, museums tell stories

through objects, and so the object becomes the eyewitness. So even when you don't have someone who is telling the story about what happened personally to them, through an object and using other evidence, can still tell that story, never as powerful, of course, as firsthand testimony. That's always the way that you would want to go, but where you can't do that, there are ways of doing this through objects.

So the Syria exhibition that we mentioned earlier, we told that story through six objects. We deliberately kept it very, very simple. We didn't want more than six objects because it was already a very, very complex story. So then you've got six starting points for telling the story. We did some research when I was at IWM amongst our audiences to understand what stories they wanted us to tell and how they wanted us to tell those stories, and it came up very clearly from that research that people want objects to help them explore these stories. So, telling stories through objects is a really, really powerful way to reach these audiences; it allows the complexity that we've been talking about. It's the opposite of social media, black and white and echo chambers. It really allows you to explore in more depth.

Museums such as Imperial War Museums also have what we might call a democratic collection, i. e., it's not the world's best, it's not the rarest, you know, it's not necessarily some incredibly fabulous, expensive antiquity. Quite often, the objects in museums such as IWM are very ordinary things that belong to ordinary people. It might be a cigarette case, it might be a shoe, it might be a book, and so these are things that are familiar to people. So when people are going to a museum, they will see a familiar object. That's a way in; it's a very accessible way of telling this wider story about sometimes sensitive and taboo objects that people have effectively been silent about. So I really think that there's an important role for museums in this space in terms of storytelling and particularly on subjects that have been unspoken in the past.

Jonathan Watkins: The reason I got into the whole art business was because of exactly as you described; I mean, the way you can communicate non-verbally, through particular presentation or contextualisation or juxtaposition of objects or different kinds of gestures. I wish, Gill, that we had been working at the Imperial War Museum at the same time; we could have had some very interesting conversations then, I think.

Sayuri, to finish our conversation, I strongly suspect that your interest in this subject is not finished, and I wondered how you see yourself perhaps working in this area in the future.

Sayuri Kose: The hibakusha are disappearing in the world, their average age is 86.13 years old. Some people I had hoped to interview this year have already passed away, unfortunately, so that makes me even more determined to record my grandfather's story while I still can. Also, I want to see different perspectives through the prisoners of war experience. So, as a journalist, I think my fundamental role in passing on memories of the war is to serve as a reminder, to raise voices that are not heard and to speak on behalf of those who cannot. So I try to find people who want to talk. Also, I want to wait for the people who can raise their voices and gain their trust. Then, of course, I need to think about how we can pass this on to the future generation. But I believe there is still something our generation can do also.

Jonathan Watkins: Yes, I think it's so important, actually. The way you're communicating a certain urgency, and it's there in the conversation that we've had involving all three of you, that in this restless world, it's very pertinent now to focus on this subject of memories of war. But the other point, Sayuri, that you're making, of course, is that we're running out of time. When it comes to the firsthand witnesses of these experiences, particularly of the Second World War and what was visited upon Japan in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, well, we only have a few years left and then it'll be the second and the third and all subsequent generations. But firsthand accounts are invaluable.