

4. A BODY THAT LIVES

Fiona Amundsen and Mercedes Vicente in conversation.

FIONA

Kia ora everyone. Firstly, thank you Mercedes and Mark for this opportunity. It is really amazing to be here and to be able to work on this project.

I guess I want to start first by positioning myself. Why is a Pakeha woman working with histories that are not hers? I certainly haven't lived them and I don't whakapapa to them. I'm talking about the Asia Pacific theatre of World War II.

For the last five plus years I've worked on these histories. It comes through a connection that I have with a Japanese family, which has changed over time, but the way that that connection has impacted has not changed and continues to resonate in me. And that family is originally from an area called Kokura. Kokura would have been bombed by the second atomic bomb which ended up being dropped on Nagasaki. The only reason Kokura wasn't bombed was because of cloud cover. And when I found that out about this family, it changed me and it made me think about not only those histories but also the histories of colonisation in Aotearoa. I found some sort of a connection.

So that's why I am so interested in these histories, and also how the histories of unresolved social violence live in the present, but we don't necessarily see them.

In terms of the actual work (for *Thick Cinema*), it's titled *A Body That Lives*. It's looking at a particular history that occurred in Australia in Cowra, New South Wales where there was a massive prisoner of war camp during World War II. At one stage it had 7,000 prisoners in it. And in 1944, just over 1,000 Japanese prisoners attempted a mass breakout so that they could literally take their own lives, in terms of the codes of honour and what that meant in terms of capture. 235 were killed, gunned down by Australians. Now on that site is a huge memorial both to the Australians that died, and the Japanese who died.

nb. portions of this session were not documented due to the recordist having to leave the room in order to take the lunch order.

I found out about this story from an elderly Japanese woman who acted in a play about it. I am yet to meet an Australian who is not from the area that



Still: Fiona Amundsen, *A Body that Lives* (2017). Image courtesy of artist.

<http://www.circuit.org.nz/film/a-body-that-lives-excerpt>

knows that history. And so I am really interested in what histories get told and what histories get visualised both officially and unofficially.

MERCEDES

The film has three components, the main part being the interview, or the testimony. Could you talk about how the elements were constructed and [describe] the other elements of the film?

FIONA

It starts with silent archival footage, which I purchased from the American archives in its raw form. It was eventually edited into a documentary that was called *The Last Bomb*, which was released after World War II and just prior to the atomic bombs as well as the aerial flight bombings of Japan.

It starts with this shot in the Pacific, it's not in any specific location and it's not identifiable. I've cropped into it, so it showed these bodies in the service of collective violence, operating in violence together. And they are relatively rapid cuts. It's completely silent. And then that moves to black screen.

MERCEDES

You crop the image but you also re-edit it.

FIONA

I totally re-edit it. Then it moves to black screen and you hear an official voice over which is actually triggered by your body as you enter the memorial site in Cowra. It talks about what the site is, "you're looking at such and such", but in the film you don't get to see it. I was really interested in this silence, but a very, very strong visual and a strong visual violence, bodies collectively working together, flipping to black and listening and that kind of attunement of the senses.

MERCEDES

It also prepares you to listen to the testimony that comes right after it.

FIONA

That's the second section, the discussion with Mr Murakami, who is the only living survivor now of that

event. He is 96. I met him earlier this year and it's really a discussion between him and a woman Mami San who has a PhD on Japanese POW experience in Cowra.

MERCEDES

And the films ends with...

FIONA

The very last section ends with close up shots of the bomb zone. [The film] slowly reveals that you are actually looking at this huge memorial garden in a very Australasian type setting.

MERCEDES

When I was thinking of inviting you to do the project I knew you had long history as a photographer and had recently turned to moving image. What is it that moving image offers you that photography does not?

FIONA

That's a good question. Prior to 2013, I had never worked with a human being in my work either. I simultaneously picked up working with a moving image camera as well as working with a live human. And there was an obvious connection in the sense that the body moves, the image moves, the body moves in time, the image moves in time.

Moving image allows me to care for the people I am working with in a way that I found still photography a bit restricted. It allows a connection that occurs across the time and space of capturing the interview and the discussion on camera. And there is an immediacy. When I am setting up the camera, that's it. I set up the camera, I don't look through the camera. Whereas in my still photo practice I am by the camera, I am very much behind and underneath the hood of the camera.

So there is something about our bodies, my body and the body of the person I am working with, being alive and connected in that space together and the camera actually allowed that. Also I think the moving image camera - to reference Barry Barclay – allows listening, whereas a still camera, it's much harder.

MERCEDES

In the testimony of Murakami the camera is very close to him, to the point that when he bends, the restlessness of his body constantly moves outside the frame. It is very claustrophobic, very imposing to put the camera on him but also on us because it is a very extreme close up of him. I know that wasn't intentional, can you talk about it?

FIONA

Mr Murakami is extremely deaf, hence his constant ducking in and out of frame. And we were filming in a very tight space. At first I tried to control that. Actually how it's shot is much wider, but he is still rocking in the frame.

Whilst that discussion was occurring I wasn't looking through the camera, so I didn't know that his ear was perfectly in frame, as we were talking about sound. And I think in the editing process I realised that actually by cropping in on that imagery and the ducking in and out enabled that kind of connection between the discomfort in his body and the discomfort in our bodies as we view him trying to remember but also not wanting to remember.

MERCEDES

It has a bodily effect. Also because it picks up almost random events in the image, like suddenly we find ourselves listening looking at his ear or the texture of the wall. There is a certain element of chance in the image that is not intentional. It works away from the convention of the perfect headshot that concentrates everything on the facial expression. Instead it allows for that wandering of your eyes and mind while he is actually talking. In certain ways it creates a claustrophobic, very emotional state in encountering his testimony but also moves away from the conventional framing.

FIONA

I also think it releases us as an audience from worrying about the testimony and how we can access it or its truth value, it's 'actual-ness'. That testimony is

something you can never grasp. For me that's not the motivator of the words, it's not about how accurate a testimony is or isn't, it's actually about what we do with ourselves as we listen. And his constant shifting and awkwardness and bows in and out of frame actually enables that connection or that wandering into a different space, away from the truth value of the testimony.

MERCEDES

You also talk about the care of the reality.

FIONA

I actually have a quote from (Eve Kosofsky) Sedgewick which I wrote out this morning. And in terms of this idea of a "reparative reading" which is contrary or in contrast to a paranoid known and critical exploding, if you will,

I am really interested in moving from the rigidity of that and this is the central quote:

"So rather than asking is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know, rather ask the questions of what does knowledge do, the pursuit of it, the receiving again of knowledge of what one already knows. How, in short, is knowledge informative and how best does one move in its causes and effects."

And it's that latter part, the causes and effects. But it's also not just knowledge, it's moving amongst relationship and that relationship is with me and Mr Murakami but it's also for the audience and the work and it involves a trust. It's a trusting in that there has been a connection made, but it doesn't operate as a material property in the artwork.

MERCEDES

It's also a commitment, no? To continue an activity that perhaps will not be fulfilled completely, it is incomplete, it is insufficient, but still intends to be a witness of that reality, no?

FIONA

Absolutely. I have a real issue with this term secondary witness that is used a lot, particularly in

relationship to still photography. I don't want to be a secondary witness. I want to be a witness now, connected now. And then how you take that connection into the wayfinding of your life? Because when somebody shares that sort of, a story like that with you, I think it's a real responsibility in what one does with that, both as for me the art maker, but also for the audience.

AUDIENCE

I was interested in your relationship with him and the other interviewer. It's almost like he was being interrogated again and was it emotional stress... I couldn't really tell from the artwork whether... or maybe it was just a Japanese way of speaking, but how did he feel about reliving that? Did he really want to tell it?

FIONA

They have known each other for 13 years. She is a friend of his. She is a scholar on that particular topic. They have travelled many times together back to Cowra. We are still all in communication. Mr Murakami has seen the film. His response was "Why is my head chopped off?" But you will never, ever know any of that in the work. So I guess I'm wanting, as an audience, you to be faced with your own need to know. What is it you want to see that satisfies all that?

MERCEDES

Fiona doesn't speak Japanese. She is familiar with Japanese, some words she can pick up but she couldn't understand the extent of the conversation. In a way she's a witness, but she cannot understand the exchange that is happening between them. So she also has to trust. Do you want to talk about that?

FIONA

My Japanese is like that of an eight year old, but weirdly I understand some concepts. I knew the word for nostalgia, so as soon as he said it I got that sense. I didn't know that she was pushing and pushing and pushing. I didn't know the nuance of that until I had it translated. And that's where I am really interested in this kind of back and forth between Mr Murakami and I and Mami San around what gets included, because

obviously there's hours of footage, hours of audio.

MERCEDES

It is a testament as well to the fact that we could perceive lots of information but not necessarily comes through the verbal testimony. So while you were there you could sense, with your little Japanese, but also with the body language, a sense that you were picking up enough to follow what was happening throughout that conversation.

FIONA

Yeah and the connectedness in that moment and the moments that preceded, and the evening that preceded that first meeting and the breakfast in the second meeting and going to the train station and all of that connectedness. And I am really interested in how an artwork, how a film alludes to that without necessarily showing it.

AUDIENCE 3

How many people have seen this film so far?

FIONA

You are the first.

AUDIENCE 3

As a viewer you feel quite implicated. It was very affecting, but it was affecting almost like you were in a room where you were seeing violence performed. His actions are fragmenting himself, and it wasn't so much that I was weeping but it's emotionalising me now to recall. I felt like you were observing a bug that was pinned. He was getting out of the frame, he is looking at you, all of the body language which you can feel and read was like, *get me out of here*. So that was a feeling. So my emotional response to it was get me out of here, it wasn't so much... I didn't feel like I understood this story better, well I could imagine his story and it made me feel like his emotion and my emotion therefore became... and that is just one person. But if responded to it quite strongly.

FIONA

I don't think these histories, even over a seven-

ty-three year timeframe, should be any easier.

I also think that the ethics are also put back on the audience rather than just “Who am I to work with this person to tell his story?”

AUDIENCE 3

Well it's an inevitable question. Do you sit there or do you remove yourself from it. It's almost like what I'm doing now, to go “Hey but do you understand the implications of this?”

FIONA

My obligation is to Mr Murakami. That's all I care about. That's my primary obligation. A better example is other people I've worked with who have asked for things to be changed or taken out. But again, as an audience you'll never know that.

AUDIENCE

Was it justified to put an elderly man who's been through such a terrible experience through that much emotional pressure?

FIONA

But I think the emotional pressure, a lot of it's your assumption.

AUDIENCE 2

Yeah, we don't know.

MERCEDES

But I think that pressure ... I felt the same, a defensiveness, in witnessing the way that Mami San pushes him. She doesn't let him go. I could never do that. And I don't know if that's cultural. It could be the relationship that they have or it could be that there is a need to know, there is a need to get an answer from him.

What we are witnessing is a relationship between them, where Fiona is there to record it, but that conversation is a conversation that has taken place between them and it's a conversation that's been happening for 13 years. So it's just that Fiona makes it public. But that conversation seems to be something that has

happened, because [Mami San says] “you told me this and you told me that, can you tell me this again...”

AUDIENCE 4

Has he got dementia?

FIONA

No, he's just deaf. There was a lot of repetition. When he's ducking out of frame, he's going eh?, he's asking. Cause she's [over] there, I'm there, the camera's there, she's there, he's here.

AUDIENCE 5

So you edit out those pauses, those “eh?”

FIONA

No they're in there. And the repetition. They are repeating the same question again so he can hear it.

AUDIENCE

My response was a whole lot of respect [for what] you were showing for this man and his humanness. Yes, he's 96, he's totally cogent and he's fully able and he's choosing to be there, so it honoured him as full intellect, which he clearly is. I read it that way.

MERCEDES

Thank you so much.

Fiona Amundsen is a New Zealand based artist, who utilises photography and moving-image to question paradigmatic socio-cultural histories and narratives associated with how the Asia Pacific Theatre (WWII) is officially memorialized across parts of Asia and the Pacific. She works with archival and present day imagery to question what it might mean, along with how, to make sense of such narratives now. Fiona is senior lecturer in the School of Art and Design at AUT University. She has exhibited and held residences/fellowships both nationally as well as internationally in Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, the United States and Europe.