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A Story of She. Collective Feminist Film Making at Home (between Japan and Scotland)

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Please see HTML version for accompanying video content

Introduction

‘Speculative Fiction: Practicing Collectively’ is the title of our ongoing collective film practice, produced between different people and places, on our screens, and in our homes, in Scotland and Japan. Situated in critical feminist perspectives, our collective approach uses digital spaces as a platform for collaboration and co-learning opportunities, meant as explicitly feminist acts of sharing knowledge and ways of knowing, and mutual learning. In this contemporary moment when COVID-19 has forced us to “socially” distance, the online format and cross-cultural nature of the project supports such deliberate sharing practices, and our dialogue across disparate geographies and perspectives.

The film is made of three sections, each of which has been produced in different constellations of collaboration, different ways of being together. It will be shown in its entirety at an exhibition at Tokyo Arts and Space[1] in December 2020; the first section of the film, which you can view alongside this short article, was also exhibited online, via a Japanese art and cultural support project[2] in August 2020. This first film was created collectively in response to a theme devised by Natsumi Sakamoto and Rachel Grant: attending to everyday labour, care, and gender roles at home. Sakamoto, a member of Back and Forth Collective [3], a transnational feminist artist collective founded in Tokyo, invited two Japanese artists from the collective. Duffy, Clarke and McWhinney were invited as artists based in Scotland.

This article is also collectively written and edited. The film is still being produced, emerging through three stages of production. The central point of departure for our collaboration was the essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction' (1986) by speculative feminist writer Ursula K. Le Guin. Paraphrasing anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Evolution', she presents the story of human origin by redefining technology as a cultural 'carrier bag' rather than a weapon of domination. Le Guin disrupts the cultural imaginary of the heroic, technology driven theory of evolution instead proposing: "before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home" (1989:151). Before the sticks and spears there was a set of cupped hands, a belly "a bag or basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, a net woven of your own hair" (ibid: 152), to gather oats, seeds and berries, carried home. Home is described as "another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people" (ibid. 153). Le Guin's carrier bag becomes a porous and plural vessel that has the ability to hold complex, seemingly disparate things in relation and in tension.

The first film involved us producing short films as individuals, with explicit instructions, to create a narrative around a fictional 'she' and to visualise it with film, animation, and performance documentation. This was followed by a lively discussion that addressed gender issues and stereotypes in Japan and the UK, including the controversies around women breastfeeding, motherhood, housework, childcare and care work, which remain too often invisible, un-paid, and undervalued. The following section presents diverse reflections on the key idea –home– in relation to the artists' individual practices, their work, and/or the making of the first part of our film, which was made in the Spring of 2020, under lockdown. The final section addresses the collective nature of this ongoing experiment.

HOME(S)

Asako

Compared to LeGuin, I, who have a limited experience of home, try to consider multiple perspectives, broadening the notion of home, to neighbourhoods, to home for other species. I often think about home through my experience with others: collaborating members, my family, my flatmate, my neighbours, including people who have different cultural backgrounds. It makes me rethink my notion of life. My interests are in education and the transmission of life skills and culture. Each family, community, country, and generation have different ideas to tell, and share with newcomers. Home is made visible through these differences (as well as through our similarities).

Asako's usual focus is on migrant issues in Japan, which she often explores through food, and a reflective dialogue between her life and the Ethiopian communities in Tokyo; food is a connective thread through work that explores heritage, care, and skills. In the film, this is shared through images of Asako's mother's cooking, and the making of a 'good Injera', a staple food in Ethiopia.

Fionn

For me, as an artist who has often not had the financial stability to afford to rent a studio, working from home is the norm. A while ago my dad also reminded me that his mother

also worked from home, bringing back shirts to finish from the factory she worked in briefly when he was a child. The area I live in now was once home to a community of weavers who also worked from their homes. To me, this idea we have of 'working from home', seems a little bit of a misnomer. Are we in some ways re-homing work? Or could we be opening up possibilities of new ways of understanding how working lives and home lives are (and have always been) linked in some way or another?

During lockdown the domestic became everything, everything became domestic. Without social distractions attention lingered on aspects of my home life that usually go ignored – the weathering of the sandstone around my windows, the germination of weeds outside, the violence of the noise and vibration of our washing machine. This is where stories of the Cailleach grabbed me – the washing machine is a whirlpool, a duvet a snow-covered landscape. The Cailleach is a figure in Celtic mythology who lends her name to places across Ireland, the west of Scotland and the Isle of Man. Stories surrounding her are multifarious and she goes by many names but often is depicted as a female deity who lives multiple lives and has control over the weather. She is often portrayed as fierce, vindictive and wielding power over life and death. Yet she is also associated with the domestic and with family life – for example the story I use of her washing her cloak at the Corryvreckan whirlpools. For this reason, she embodies the associations we make of the female with the home and with nature - yet remains a powerful and terrifying figure.

Jen

The concept of ecology is often explained with reference to home, via its etymological roots in the Greek oikos, meaning different, inter-related areas of a 'household' (family, family property, the house itself – In ancient Greece, it referred to the line of descent (from father to son), as well as the spaces of the home and forms of work or leisure divided by gender).

In this film I wanted to explore the materiality of motherhood, breastfeeding, and breast-milk. The leakiness of motherhood, spilling from the confines of a quarantined home, involved me making aspects of my home, my body (and my baby's body, feeding from mine), public. This kind of exposure is controversial, even troubling in Japan, just as feminism is where (art about) the female body is still often considered obscene and pornographic. My film draws some of the narrative from an article called *Fountains of Love and Loveliness: In Praise of the Dripping Wet Breast*. (Giles, 2002), poetically working with anthropological and scientific language. Eating makes persons.

Mei

The word 'home' reminds me of housework done by mothers in typical Japanese families. When I went to elementary school in the 1990's, most Japanese mothers were housewives, in charge of the unpaid housework. My mother worked part-time for a very long time, even though she had higher education. I have been spending a lot of time in Indonesia, recently. There are so many women who work as "aunty" (domestic workers). The "aunty" who comes to my home once a week is not only a domestic worker but also an 'adviser' on local culture. Since most mothers do unpaid housework in Japan, I have complicated feelings about paying someone to clean my house, but I also imagine if someone had helped my mother when I was a kid, she wouldn't have

needed to stop her pursuits. During the pandemic, 'aunty' had to take a leave; I started cooking more seriously than before: I was pregnant, and had lots of time. It came to my mind I have to feed my kid probably for the next 18 years. I was watching a cooking video by a Japanese celebrity on Youtube, who shows her everyday routine, cleaning and cooking bento for her kids by herself in a very big posh house. I was shocked she doesn't have a domestic worker (at least in the video), and I felt confused by the model of a good Japanese mother, still expected to do housework on her own.

Mei's work responds to the particular sweeping sounds of the Sapu Lidi, an Indonesian broom made from the midrib of coconut trees. Unable to see the owner, Mei speculates that the owner may be female, male or a domestic worker. Despite their economic importance domestic workers working for other households are still not recognized as workers and thus not protected by national labour laws. (International Labour Organisation 2020)

Natsumi

Home is a shelter, a space where bodies rest and accumulate energy. Souls are washed and refreshed, covered with warmth and security. Home is a psychological space that is created and maintained with a great amount of effort - which is often invisible. When I was little, my mum devotedly gave us her love, and I had no doubt that was her nature and the love sustained by itself. I am interested in the "invisibility" of domestic works and how this knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation, "secret knowledge". The gender division of labour is still strong in Japan. I felt it strongly when I became a mother in Tokyo in 2014. Childcare and housework are supposed to be a mother's job; men "help" when they can - in Japan, fathers who participate the childcare often be called "イクメン" (iku: childcare, men:men - to praise them).

I have been thinking about whether "female solidarity" is possible today, researching forgotten customs and traditions within female roles. Living between Japan and the UK for the last 10 years, seeing both cultures and societies, I am interested in how global feminism can be discussed comparatively.

Sarah

Over the last 6 years, I have moved home, into a new space, nine times; for me, home is fluid. It is not about the bricks and cabinets, but the people and connectivity found within that space. Having a secure place to call Home gives us freedom; once we have roots, we can grow and blossom. In the last 6 months, notions and boundaries of home have been turned on their heads.

I've been recording music for these films from my home, in competition with the outside sirens, downstairs neighbours and raucous local kids. All these noises leak through my floorboards and windows, so I've been amplifying small soft sounds to use for the films in defensive response to this noisy onslaught. I play directly alongside the visuals, then strip and layer these recordings to create a sonic landscape in response to the tapestry of the other artists' home experiences.

A speculative Conclusion, reflecting on our ongoing collaboration

'The story of she' has been about using fiction as a tool for solidarity. Since the pandemic forced us to adapt to new ways of living and working, our homes have become work spaces, (which as mentioned above, for many if not all of us, has always been an unpaid work place) but is now acknowledged as a site of *paid* work, too. Our collective work has allowed us to make this visible. One of our ambitious goals is to explore what it means to live, or do trans-national, intersectional feminism. Instead of contextualizing the terminology itself, our strategy has been to think through collective *practice*. The model of collaboration we are working with is rooted in sharing our knowledge and skills. Our collective decision-making, held together by regular online meetings and emails, also invited informal, personal and emerging perspectives on feminist practice today, such as those outlined above.

These conversations don't guide us to a clear, correct answer, yet it has given us a sense of solidarity, and have been for some an almost therapeutic experience. Pragmatically, we are also inspired by historical examples such as *The London film collective* a woman only collective founded in 1972, for whom "it was important that everyone who worked on a film production was involved in the whole film process, members would rotate their positions during production; imparting the knowledge they had gained to the next person, accumulating collective knowledge" (Brauer, 2016: 49). As a group, then, we have discussed how we might take care of each others' capacities and make our interdependencies visible. For us, it is also important to see whether this method of sharing and accumulation might draw out some of the tensions, differences or commonalities in our transnational (feminist) positions. We hope to write more about this when we have completed the film.

Notes

[1] Tokyo Arts and Space, Open Site 5 <https://www.tokyoartsandspace.jp/en/archive/exhibition/2020/20201217-7028.html>

[2] Cheer for Art: a project run by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government to support the artists under COVID-19 crisis: <https://cheerforart.jp/detail/3099>

[3] Back and Forth Collective: <https://backandforthcollective.wordpress.com>

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Dr Jennifer Clarke is an anthropologist, artist, and curator, and Lecturer at an art school in Scotland. Her research and public work take place at the interstices of contemporary art and anthropology: in practice and theory, in Europe and Japan, projects responding to urgent social and ecological issues from a feminist perspective, and often in collaboration.

Fionn Duffy is an interdisciplinary artist based in Glasgow, Scotland. With an interest in the ethical and ecological concerns at stake when considering the relationship between the porous human body and material, Duffy's work manifests as sculpture, video and text. Responding to methods of preservation and production, she works at the edges of transformation with an attentiveness to residue, absence and persistence. (www.fionnduffy.co.uk)

Rachel Grant is a freelance curator based in Aberdeen in the North East of Scotland. In 2018 she set up Fertile Ground, a platform for her curatorial practice that takes a context specific approach focusing on new commissions with artists and works with people across disciplines and backgrounds (www.fertileground.info).

Mei Homma is a visual artist and co-founder of Back and Forth Collective based in Tokyo and Bandung. With her interest in historical relationships between Indonesia and Japan, she makes videos and installations using archival materials, novels and everyday materials to tell hidden stories related to women. Her interdisciplinary approach explores social and political issues and multilateral relationships (<https://www.meihomma.com/>)

Natsumi Sakamoto is a visual artist based in Glasgow. She works with film, drawings and multi media installation. Her multi-disciplinary projects explore oral traditions and narratives to regenerate forgotten history and customs, in order to view them from a contemporary perspective. Strongly influenced by feminism, her motivation is to activate marginalized histories by voicing personal experiences (<http://www.natsumi-sakamoto.com>).

Asako Taki is an artist, an activist and a coordinator of art projects based in Tokyo. By taking forms of participatory projects into performance and installations of various mediums, her works explore boundaries produced by nation and gender, as well as the shape of relationships, between individuals and among society. (<https://asakotaki.wordpress.com/>).

Sarah McWhinney is a collaborative artist and musician based in Glasgow. She uses sound, projection and drawing to explore the interplay between landscape, muscle memory and improvisation. Cello as an instrument has the closest range of tone to the human voice; she plays this, alongside vocals and other gathered sounds, to create a counterpoint with the visual world (<https://cargocollective.com/SarahMcWhinney>).