

**One Cut One Bow interviews:
Atsushi Fukunaga**



Atsushi Fukunaga, *The dubbing happenings 13 – The biological sciences around the space* – (2015), illustration of magazine, acrylic sheet, one-way mirror sheet, glass, acrylic mirror sheets, frame; translation in German, Japanese; 100.5 x 100.5 x 2.5 cm

One Cut One Bow (Magdalen Chua and Ryotaro Hoshino) interviewed Atsushi Fukunaga on 10 February 2016 at Fukunaga's studio in Berlin. His works investigate the physical and aural possibilities for representing the invisible nature of onomatopoeia and sound. Increasingly, he has been exploring the related concepts of language and voice through sculptures, collages, and sound installations, often in collaboration with different language speakers. Originally from Hiroshima, Japan, Fukunaga has been based in Berlin since 2006.

Beginnings in sound and onomatopoeia

Atsushi Fukunaga (AF): Since 2006, I have been making works about sound and when I started, my ideas were from Japanese manga comics.

One Cut One Bow (OCOB): Perhaps we could start with your earlier works. *No view, no sounds in Denmark* (2007) makes me think about things that are there, but cannot be seen or heard. Could you tell us more about it?

AF: You wouldn't be able to hear anything from the work and in the space. However, from certain angles within the space, you would be able to see something. I drew symbols and letters using glossy transparent spray on the white wall. The images were pictograms, and based on transcriptions by a Dane, using Danish, after hearing Japanese onomatopoeia read aloud. The work was intended to create a more nuanced perception of language by reading something aloud and my techniques were intended to show the invisibility of sound. My stencils for the spray were displayed in the space behind, to show how I made my work.

When I first made works, the sounds were from me. For example, *baki* or *poki* in *The sounds of broken colorpencil* (2007) are my sounds, and the sounds in the *Kosmos* series of collages that I made in 2012, are all mine.

Illusions and prejudices of one's own sounds

OCOB: What do you mean when you say "your sounds?" Do you mean that you create the sounds?

AF: You were asking me about *Die Taubeuhr / Pigeon Clock* (2011). It was based on sounds that were translated from my own experience. In Japan, when I was a child, I would go to my friend's house. My friend had a pigeon clock, which went *popooooo-popooooo*. When I came to Berlin, I saw the same kind of clock and heard about cuckoo clocks. I thought that there were two different versions of clocks — a pigeon clock made in Japan, and a cuckoo clock made in Germany. But, I now know that they are one and the same.

OCOB: What other personal experiences have inspired your works?

AF: I always ask myself the question, "As sound is invisible, how can I show it?" Before coming to Berlin, I used letters as objects for sound, but started to look more closely at sound itself. Take for example, the static white noise produced by the TV. When the TV doesn't screen any programmes, it goes *zaaaaaaa*, with random, flickering "dots" or "snow." That was 10 or 20 years ago. I used to watch TV and would sometimes fall asleep. Three hours later, I would wake up thinking that it's raining. There wouldn't be any rain when I look outside, but on glancing at the TV, I would then realise that it was producing the sound.

For *Rainy Noise* (2011), I created a system with a pump for water, making it look like it was raining. People would walk in through the entrance here, look inside and hear the noise. At times, they would look at the water droplets; on other occasions, they would look up, but of course there would not be any rain. I showed the visual effect of rain and noise, and as before, this work is based on my own experience of sound. This experience with the rainy noise producing *zaaaa* is mine, whether from my illusion or prejudice.



Atsushi Fukunaga; *The sounds of broken colorpencil* (2007); color pens, paper; 50 x 50 x 70cm



Atsushi Fukunaga; *Rainy Noise* (2011); wood, plastic board, rubber hose, PVC pipe, water, umbrella, television, speaker; 350 x 300 x 100cm



Atsushi Fukunaga; *Die Taubeuhr / Pigeon Clock* (2011); cuckoo clock, Pigeon's ornament, wood, oil-based paint; 18 x 20 x 10cm



Atsushi Fukunaga; *No view, no sounds in Denmark* (2007), sponge sheets, white spray painted wall, dimensions variable

Back to the origin of sound

AF: I have always been making objects about onomatopoeia, but for *Rainy Noise* (2011), there was a shift towards looking at the origin of sound. I was also in a collaboration, *Dance in the dark* (2011) where I also used sound without onomatopoeia. As it was dark, you could not see, but could only hear the dancer moving on the stage. There were also a lot of materials from common objects, but when you hear only the sound produced by the material, you might not perceive which sound is of which material. The audience would look straight ahead, and it was only

through sound that they could sense where the dancer was. At times, the dancer would throw the materials, creating two sounds. It made people wonder where the dancer was. After the performance, the stage was empty, and people were left wondering about the relationship between material, sound, direction, and so on. Previously, I was interested in how to transform sound into a form, but I felt that I was focusing too much on words and wanted to go back to the basics, and rethink my approach. I then began looking at voice, and asked people to be involved in my project. It became a turning point for my practice.

In 2011, alongside development of works about onomatopoeia, I started this new direction towards voice. While I was investigating the voice, for instance, in Open Square Project at the Asahi Art Square [*The hurly-burly chorus - Urban symphony in Sumida and Asakusa* - (2013)], I continued developing my works about onomatopoeia. Initially, it was difficult for me to convey the nuance or emotion of Japanese onomatopoeia to Germans. I would first show my Japanese onomatopoeia and its effect on sound or its nuance, but it's difficult for others to grasp all these. So, right now, I am doing the opposite. Since 2014, I have been asking other language speakers about their language, and collect their sounds for collages.

Exploring language in parallel

AF: Since this year, I have been exploring, in parallel, the theme of language in the context of relational art, between others and myself.

OCOB: When you ask people to provide you with some kind of onomatopoeia, do you ask them to write it down in alphabetical characters, or do you ask them to pronounce it?

AF: It was rather tricky at first. For example, for the sound installation I did in 2013, I asked around 100 Japanese to imitate sounds with their voices. I realised though, that if I explained too much, people would be influenced.

OCOB: What happens as you collect sounds from them? From works, such as *The dubbing happenings 04 - Diabolique* - (2014), it seems like you ask them for a sound, whether it's something they write down or say, and then look for the corresponding letters in magazines to represent them.

AF: I'll show you my folders. Some participants roll the paper, and I collect whatever they do with it. For recent works of *The dubbing happening* series, I first make a collage, say using a magazine. I then lay it out and show it to someone, asking him or her to imagine a sound. I would explain the overall concept, for example, this is about war. I might say something like, "The monster broke this," but I wouldn't express the sound I imagine the monster to make.

OCOB: So when you eventually make the sound into these forms on your work, how do these words written by your friend affect the shape or size?

AF: For earlier works in *The dubbing happening* series, the size or shape of the font from the magazines didn't matter. The size of letters from magazines is limited, and even if I want to use bigger letters, I wouldn't be able to find it. At that time, I didn't think of using handwritten letters. I don't exactly know why, but I felt that the fonts from magazines were so beautiful. For some of my collages, such as the *Kosmos* series, I found the materials by accident, at a flea market. I visit the flea market every week. One day, a guy was selling a big box of these old and beautiful magazines. I wanted to buy only one magazine, but it was €2, which I thought was pretty

expensive. I asked the guy the price of one box, and it was €50. It was a lot of money for me at that time, but I bought it. When I looked inside the box, there were magazines from around 1910, 1920, '23, or '25. I had never seen them before. I used these materials, and then adventure books, as well as general interest magazines.

When I first started using these magazines and books, I didn't have any idea about the meanings behind them, but used them just as physical material. However, in my latest works (*Statistical Machine Translation* series), my approach focuses on language, drawing from adventure books about a German adventurer, Rolf Topping, published around 1915, during the period of German colonialism. I researched old books related to this story and made 17 pieces for this series. For each piece, the titles are taken from the original German title, but translated into the language of the place, where the book was set. For certain languages such as Hindi or other Asian languages, I translated the titles phonetically using Google Translate.



Dance in the dark / Digest Version 04' 34; Performance (13'10) / 5 November 2011 at Theaterhaus Berlin Mitte, Berlin, Germany; Dance: Ayaka AZECHI; Sound Installation: Atsushi FUKUNAGA; Video: Ink Agop



Atsushi Fukunaga; *The dubbing happenings 04 - Diabolique* - (2014); illustration and lettering of magazine, paste, frame, acrylic board, glass; translation in Japanese; 11.7 x 16 x 2cm



Atsushi Fukunaga; *The hurly-burly chorus - Urban symphony in Sumida and Asakusa* - (2013); mixed media: multi-speakers, PC, MP3players, sensor; dimensions variable



Atsushi Fukunaga; *Statistical Machine Translation #49 - For wholesale Namaland* - (2015); Book cover of "Rolf Torring's Abenteuer", adhesive decorative foil, acrylic boards, silver cardboard, frame; Translation in Afrikaans by Google Translate; 22.4 x 27.4 x 2.2 cm

Equality of languages

AF: I think that all languages, having developed in different regions, are equal and unique in their own way. However, with so many English speakers, the demand for English is high. Each language has its interesting points, for example, onomatopoeia in Japanese, and though there isn't as much onomatopoeia in German, the grammar is interesting. In the *Statistical Machine Translation* series, the words used are from the local language, yet from a German book. I am interested in this notion of equality, between these two languages. When I was studying German, I came across words that I did not know, but would still read them aloud. I

think that there is meaning in the act of reading something though without understanding. Using alphabetical characters to convey a particular language, links the two different languages of German and a local language. It's an important aspect for me. When you read the letters, there is rhythm or nuance. If you cannot read it, it is just an object. By emitting sound through reading, you might get a new rhythm or nuance.

OCOB: it's interesting, because it also looks at the idea of speaking or voicing something.



Atsushi Fukunaga; *Storyteller 04 – The North Wind and the Sun* – (2015); mirror glass, magnifying mirrors, frame; translation in French, Taiwanese, 24.5 x 24.5 x 3.5 cm each

AF: When working on the sound installations, I didn't ask sound professionals, but ordinary people to imitate the sounds of nature. All of them said that they could not imitate the sounds as they were not professionals and their voices were not good. We have a Japanese onomatopoeia, *ka-kah*, for the sound of a crow. But in reality, that is not quite the sound of a crow. From my recording, it's actually like an old person crying, with a voice that has a human-like quality. When I asked someone to imitate the sound using his own voice, he said that it was difficult because of the frequency and could only make the sound *ka-kah*. I asked him to listen again and explained that the sound of the crow was not *ka-kah*. So he tried again, sometimes saying *kuwa kuwa* or *ku-ah ku-ah* and then a new onomatopoeia was created. If I myself imitate sound, only one sound is produced. However, when I ask 100 people, then 100 various sounds are created.

Sound as performance and of emotion

OCOB: At times, when you were describing your works, I thought of a play or theatre, where you are the director, getting people and giving some instructions. There is a relationship between you and the person, and it feels like in some of your works, there is this quality of creating space, and I think of a performance.

AF: Initially people can't control their own voice, but sometimes, after trying, they have a sense of their sound. That's why reading or emitting of sound is so important. For example, in this collage, *The dubbing happenings 13 – The biological sciences around the space* – (2015), there is this octopus. When producing sound, it is not just about looking, but you might also make gestures. You become an octopus. I think sound is like an emotion. When you become an octopus, your imagination transforms, and I would like to also try working with performance.

OCOB: The sounds are also very much related to action. When you have something like this, your hand can't help but move. When you ask the participants to create sounds, do they move?

AF: Sometimes, yes. I ask them to move their bodies or imagine being a bird. I think everything is connected at the fundamental level. My idea is to select voice and letters, but sometimes, it has also involved body performance.

I have been using sound installations often since 2013 and 2014. Then last summer, I tried again but this time, resulting in collages with mirrors in a series called *Storyteller*. I would show people a collage and image, and ask them to imagine the sound. The collages would be based on a fairy tale, for example, from the Grimm brothers, Aesop's fables, or a Japanese ghost story. Before 2013, I cut out letters from magazines. However, this time, I would use people's writing. For example, when I asked an elderly Japanese woman to produce sound, she wrote as she was looking at the image, and I used her writing by scanning it. Although I previously had an aversion to writing, I have become interested in handwriting produced by others.

OCOB: How about the sheet for the *Statistical Machine Translation* works? It's also reflective, yet not quite like a mirror.

AF: This decorated sheet for that series is like a cover of colonial history. In a way, obscuring history yet also acknowledging that it is in the background. I used a mirror for the *Storyteller* works because it's appropriate when you think about the properties of sound. If you look at the letters or the figure in the works, you have to focus on one point. Perhaps you might see both, but you cannot take in everything all at one time. I think that the mirror expresses the invisibility of sound.



Atsushi Fukunaga; *Marvelous Catchphrase – Untitled 01–* (2016); textured acrylic sheet, cutting sheet, aluminum board, frame; 51.4 x 26.4 x 4.5 cm

The future

OCOB: What are you currently working on?

AF: I am planning a new work that is a step further into my exploration of language. It is a comment about the Japanese government, as it is in such a bad state.

I have a poster here, which is about the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Agreement. This poster was by the Liberal Democratic Party around 2010 or so when they were the opposition, and were explaining that they were absolutely against the TPP and would definitely not support it. Literally, the poster reads, "We don't lie. We are against the TPP. We won't change our minds." For small and medium-sized enterprises, and those in agriculture in Japan, these were of course such beautiful words, which we now realise were lies as the Liberal Democratic Party recently signed the Agreement. My idea is to cover the words with this decorative sheet, blurring and altering the appearance of the words. [Note: Fukunaga has recently completed this work, *The Marvelous Catchphrase* (2016)].

I have also been reading the history of the Grimm brothers. They made a German dictionary, gathering words from local languages and dialects as well as folktales. Their fairy tales are not just in Germany, but also in other countries. Long ago, people would go round, telling stories in songs. The transmission of these tales orally and its associations in different cultures and languages are truly fascinating.

In future, I would like to go around talking to different people in various countries, asking them to produce sounds in relation to these stories, and gather them.