

Lucy Beech (b. 1985) is an artist filmmaker whose practice revolves around collaboration and encompasses roles such as directing, editing, choreography, research and writing. Forthcoming/recent exhibitions of their work include: Kunstinstitute Melly NL, Edith-Ruß-Haus für Medienkunst, Oldenburg, Hamburger Bahnhof, Kunsthalle, Mainz DE, Tramway Glasgow, De La warr Pavilion and The Liverpool Biennial UK. With their collaborator Edward Thomasson they have presented work at Tate Britain UK, South London Gallery, Maureen Paley London UK, The Barbican Theatre UK, The Camden Arts Center UK. Beech is currently guest professor at The Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf and recently completed a fellowship at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science.

NOTES ON WARM DECEMBERS

A correspondence between Lucy Beech (LB) and Cassie Westood (CW). Cassie Westwood is the narrator and co-author of the script of *Warm Decembers*, she is a writer and teacher, based in Oxford. Her most recent essays are on queerness, earworms, and allusions.

LB: Through two years of correspondence you and I adapted Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's eight chapter verse novel into a screenplay. In the end we decided that the film would be book-ended by a prologue and epilogue and through the process of making, you became the narrator of the film. The prologue is a direct reference to the text that you wrote, 'The Use of a Poem in Transition', which embraces instances of writers (and especially poets) incorporating earlier drafts, deleted passages, or false starts into a published work. In the epilogue you're reading from Sedgwick's notes directly. So I wanted to ask first, what was most significant to you about Sedgwick publishing her notes and what did you find most exciting about Sedgwick's method of leaving the textual decisions and excisions on display? Did you find that a lot of the poets undertaking this work of poetic salvage tended to be queer?

CW: I did find that the writers working with waste tended to be queer. I don't know if this was because there was a bias in what I was looking for. There seems to be a really obvious reason for why queer writers might find some kind of meaning in forms that are unfinished, or poems and novels that advertise a certain difficulty in finding a satisfactory final shape. Putting waste on view is a means of advertising the changes and everything that change implies. There were of course also people talking about waste, long before the contemporary moment. Most of my examples tend to come from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Take for example the English essayist Charles Lamb talking in the 1820s about his visit to Cambridge where the manuscript for John Milton's poem, 'Lycidas', is stored. He writes about how shocked and horrified he was to see annotations and deletions and remnants of the drafting process on view. He says it's almost unthinkable to imagine that the poem might have been any other way.

The question of what we do with our waste became important in the early nineteenth century, with the increasing availability of printed matter. Paper and printing becomes much cheaper and books are produced and designed to be consumed and then passed on. Although you had circulating libraries, I think there would have been an increasing sense of books themselves being no longer quite as rare and precious, but actually a kind of potential-

ly disposable item. 'Penny dreadfuls' were after all a Victorian invention. So I wouldn't be surprised to find a historical correlation with that. The Romantic poets had also been profoundly interested in fragments: think of Hyperion by Keats, or 'Kubla Khan' by Coleridge. There's a whole genre of the fragment poem and a Romantic interest in ruins as well. I think they're connected to the subject.

LB: So would you say the romantic poets are like a precursor to the genre of poetic waste?

CW: Yeah, I think I was trying to work that out, really, because there are some quite important differences between the Romantic fragment poem which gestures towards the whole, and the poems that I look at in that essay, which refer to the stuff the writers had to get rid of to get there. It's not like the poems by Sedgwick or the novel I look at by Merrill or Ocean Vuong gesture towards some vast sublime thing that you can't quite apprehend, it's more like, the process of making becomes the emphasis.

LB: This process of showing working is also of course quite different from the ruin. In relation to our editing process which was quite multi-layered I was thinking about how we switched all the time between formal and informal methods of exchange around the poem, as we tried to get closer to building a new form for it as a screenplay. For example I remember asking you to write a timeline of the life of Beatrix in order to map a trajectory of the character that we were pulling out, to become the protagonist of the film and then, in other ways, we were thinking more intuitively about how certain lines spoke to us both in different ways. I think we both knew quite quickly that Beatrix was going to be our protagonist. What drew you to the character of Beatrix?

CW: In a way the figure of Beatrix feels familiar from some of Sedgwick's more autobiographical essays. I realized that she somewhat describes a story that I could tell about my own childhood, not quite understanding the conventions that the rest of the family seem content to operate. You and I have been referring to Beatrix as an orphan, what was it that you felt compelling about the story of her absent parents?

LB: There is such strong visual imagery attached to Beatrix's attempts to understand who she is. Brought up by distant relatives (her aunt and cousin) she is a teenager caught in the process of carving out her subjectivity which seemed a very interesting place to meditate on the experience of transition. The poem seems to embody the work involved in building an identity and

the simultaneous breakdown of Sedgwick's own capacity to write the poem.

CW: Yes, Sedgwick's creative approach to the poem gives you another description of how you might build a psyche from the stuff that you've got or are left with.

LB: Exactly. I remember the first time you told me that you carry these poetic works like 'The Warm Decembers' around with you as you move through the world. You called the poems which advertise the waste of making: 'totems of your transition'. This is such a beautiful image. Poetic works: all their lives, drafts, characters and images inside your pocket. I remember even discussing with you an idea I had to blow up the props so they would be huge pieces of fluff and waste objects in your pocket like Mary Norton's fantasy novel The Borrowers, or something. In the end this approach would have made the story too biographical, which of course it is, but more in the sense of the shared tools that Beatrix, you and even myself are using to shape a sense of self and the creativity inherent to that task.

CW: In the end I really like that the film begins with me talking about myself and ends with me narrating the story through Sedgwick's notes. It feels like the kind of journey that I would want from this experience – to end in a space less fixated on making a convincing story about myself. The whole process has been interesting and meaningful because it's made it so clear how hard it is to make anything. I'm thinking of all the different characters and elements of the poem that we've whittled away.

LB: It amazed me how artfully Sedgwick weaved this work of cutting and editing into the poem. She describes the poem in her notes as recording a 'crisis in writing' which manifests in the language as a sense of the poem being picked up and put down during the writing process. Scenes can slip from underneath scenes or there's sudden incoherency that can be hard to follow. Perhaps the film then, is a record of our engagement with the poem, which was equally as messy. After all it was the poem's performance of the act of searching for coherency that drew me to it in the first place. And yet, this constant sense of moving through different transformational states is what made the poem so difficult to edit, or reduce to a single narrative. I weirdly felt some guilt attached to the process of distillation, did you?

CW: I did feel a degree of compunction in cutting up the original text. A feeling that was reconciled by recognizing that loss and change are part of the creative process. But I did often ask myself: if Sedgwick was around, how would she feel about our approach?

LB: Yes me too, and then I find myself back on the second page of 'The Notes on The Warm Decembers' which feels like a call to action:

"It isn't so much a story about confusion, actually, so much as about the intense creativity passionate readers seem willing to invest in preserving, and if necessary inventing, the continuity of the nexus of individual identity. One of the defining impulses of The Warm Decembers was to find new ways of trying, experimenting with, and honoring this form of creativity.

I always saw myself as the impassioned reader experimenting with the creativity that her poem offers up in both form and content.

CW: Elsewhere she talks about this passionate approach as a form of 'ardent reading' and I actually wrote about this in a sister essay to the one I perform in the film's prologue. Ardent reading is a process of breaking off bits of books and taking them into yourself, incorporating them, or if necessary – changing endings. Sedgwick refers to this as fantasy – not because these works are of a particular genre with knights and dragons or mysterious prophecies, but fantasy books in the sense that they exist in the reader's head, not on the page.

LB: Perhaps then the film is an ardent reading of the poem! Finding enough coherency to build a new form out of the poem did feel counterintuitive at moments – like fixing it somehow. The poem does so much visual work on its own. But in the end I found choreographing the points at which the visual language of the poem comes to the fore and does the work and then falls into the background the most exciting.

CW: Yes and this richness feels complex in a different way when playing with the temporality of the poem in the context of moving image.

LB: Yes and for that reason it felt important to make time move in different directions, there's the seasonal loop, the discordant memories that feel non-linear, the timespace of a dream. It was truly exciting to feel that there were so many directions one sentence could go in but also on such close reading I gained ever greater admiration for Sedgwick's research, so many words had such deep multiplicitous meanings.

CW: Yes! Sedgwick is really good at conjuring up half images: images or phrases that are sort of amphibious in the way that they are partly visual and partly verbal.

16

LB: In your essay 'The Use of a Poem in Transition' you talk about gender for you not as an object to be found, connected to a sense of belonging or independent, insofar as it is there waiting to be discovered. How have your thoughts and feelings on this changed as you have moved through your transition?

CW: My basic understanding that I tried to express in my essay is that my sense of gender identity never felt to me like something there that I just had to dig deep enough to find, like some precious metal, or hidden ruins, or some buried secret thing. It still doesn't feel like that. It feels a lot more like learning, insofar as you have to learn to use an object rather than relate to it. Donald Winnicott called this maturation. It's a capacity that you develop, as part of learning and growing and I think broadly, that's still to me how it feels. Sensing my gender has been like learning something about myself but at the same time it's not learning about something that was already there, it's working through external information and what it means in relation to all the other bits of information that you have. You have no real schema for this, but it's like some kind of process, in which you're trying to make a meaningful structure out of the bits and pieces that you have.

LB: Would you say there is a push and pull between invention and discovery as well, or learning and unlearning.

CW: Learning is another way to describe the process that Winnicott associated with the transitional object or phenomena. We have to understand the object as found – that is, real, independent – but we also need to be able to imagine that we've made it; this is a kind of halfway house that mitigates the pain of reality. For me it really does feel like both and neither. I'm not making a gender identity, I'm learning what it means to say I feel like a woman.

LB: How do you think this relates to Beatrix's narrative?

CW: I think Beatrix is a character who feels deeply uncomfortable in her body. There's something about her that is ungainly, a bit like a horse that won't quite do what you ask – recalcitrant in some way, or stubborn.

LB: Beatrix's lack of bodily control seems to have so many meanings. For Sedgwick there is an obvious relation to creativity. I was thinking about the way in which excessive retention can be as problematic as leakiness – how Sedgwick seems to continually map ideas about containment and flow or

17

leakiness onto the female body which seems to always link back to the ability to have an independent thought, or 'hold your own'.

CW: Yes totally, I was also thinking about how to put into words the meaningfulness of Beatrix's bedwetting and urination. Although it's obviously not physiologically identical with what Sedgwick called 'anality', B's trouble with piss feels like it's best explained as an issue that stems from the anal stage of her psychosexual development. And I think the film tries to capture something of that in its visual language.

So, in my understanding, the developments associated with the anal stage focus on our ability to establish (and cross) more deliberately a border between inside and outside. This is present in the oral stage, as the infant takes into itself milk from the breast, but insofar as it's able to expel -- to move something from inside to outside -- that process is largely involuntary (throwing up). By contrast, potty training involves a dialectic of control and release, which, in broader terms, is Beatrix's whole problem. She's leaky but she's also simultaneously fixated on continence: as though that image of the orb of gratitude being filled up corresponds to the bladder she also wants to grow and fill. On the other hand, I suppose, the prohibitions and the taboo surrounding defecation and urination -- where and when we're allowed, or not allowed, to do it -- mean that the forces governing Beatrix's decisions are external, social and cultural. It's as though she's negotiating something that she wants, as well as something that the outer world wants for (or from) her, and she experiences that as a deep and almost unresolvable conflict.

The landscapes she paints are tied to this as well, I think. The 'sausages of flab', 'nipped in at the ends' to make figures and objects sound to me very like turds. Another way of thinking about the anal stage would be in Kleinian terms: it's the first occasion on which an infant can make reparation for its retaliatory attacks on the mother (biting the breast, defecating), since the pride and pleasure expressed by parents when a child demonstrates a degree of competency in potty training must often be interpreted as pride and pleasure at what the infant has produced. It's as though what we produce can feel like a gift, or like creativity. Auden said in 'The Geography of the House' that 'all the arts derive from / This ur-act of making' -- that is, making stool.

That's what I meant, I think, by bringing the anal stage into the conversation. It feels to me as though Beatrix's room as you imagined it in the film is a way of representing the first of those issues, the passage between inside and outside. And obviously the ways that we've discussed creativity and the creative

18

process, seem to me to link quite directly to Beatrix's control and capacity to release something of herself into the world on her own terms.

Also within this creative process you and I also had to learn in this process to be leaky, right? We in a way, were excessively retentive, in that we both had so many ideas, or had done so much research. You come to the point where you've read too much, and you can't start, and you can't write. You need to take a good shit to get rid of some of the material.

LB: Yes this metabolizing is such a huge part of the poems form and content -- the idea of flow also or retention is always felt in relation to the social pressures of 'keeping things down', 'stomaching things', ejecting things -- involuntarily emotions that overflow, outbursts. The abject is one of Sedgwick's tools in this way, she's preoccupied with movement between states of being and is constantly moving across borders, rules or assumed positions, whether familial, social or biological.

I came up with the idea of using the bagpipe as the sound that accompanies the creature that lives inside Beatrix's mother's lungs. I thought of the instrument like the paperlight globe which Sedgwick analogises as the bladder. We mixed the bagpipes with a scraping technique where a cello bow is dragged backwards. The creature in Bea's mother's lungs is for Sedgwick (I presume) an image of the tuberculosis that kills her in the end, but also you mentioned before that it's something deeper to do with the gestating body? Gestating in the sense of reproducing bacteria, protozoa and the many strangers that live in our bodies. You said before that this image rejects a dominant reproductive futurism in view of messier relations. What do you make of the stranger in her mother's lungs?

CW: In my essay (which we've talked a lot about) in the 'Bathroom Songs' collection, I touch on this analogy between the different creatures that might inhabit a body including both bacteria and babies. I do think it's a suggestive idea for her, but I'm not sure whether its significance is semantic, per se, so much as associative. I mean, it's another example of being filled up from the inside -- like the orb of gratitude as you say but also in so far as -- the way that the only way we've been able to make meaning from those images is with recourse to psychoanalytic ideas, about infantile experience and outer/inner worlds.

LB: In the end, in the poem it's unclear if it's this creature scratching the inside of her lungs or the childbirth that kills Bea's mother. Either way I really connect to your reading of the creature as this other-act of gestation

19

that transgresses the bodily autonomy of the mother and especially the idea that gestation is a bodily labour continually undertaken by non CIS female bodies.

So many of Sedgwick's lines are brimming with possibilities - take the inclusion of Trollope, we talked a lot about that, Trollope in the dictionary gives: 'a vulgar or disreputable woman' - but of course there are more associations: Sedgwick seems to simultaneously reference the writer Anthony Trollope and the sluggish wobbly movement of pudding falling off its plate in Beatrix's dream. This dream scene is an example of Sedgwick's muddy threshold crossing. The father carries the Trollop-like pudding but it also stands in for him, for the way he walks, the smell on his breath. The pudding is made from 'burst dimpled milk'. Dairy stands in for a simultaneous presence and absence of animals, but also refers directly to the passage of grief as her father crosses from life to death. In this same moment Beatrix attempts to move beyond the sense of self her father constructed for her. The passage between states, the sense of being on the inside or outside of the process of constructing your own identity and the material presence of milk, create this continual pull in different directions, or of being at sea in a process of change.

CW: That whole scene in the film as you say describes the disgust that Beatrix feels so vividly. As a psychoanalytically inclined writer and a feminist, Julia Kristeva would have absolutely been on Sedgwick's radar. The abject is a way of describing how we constitute ourselves through the objects we choose to ingest (and reject), which firms up the boundary between inside and outside. But it's also the act of crossing between inside and out that can't help but reiterate the boundary. So this movement between states somehow also firms them up, which is where Sedgwick ends in her notes. She ends with a slightly despairing shrug of the shoulders as if to say: I tried, but in the end, theoretically informed writing always remains separate from the poem. They are definitively separate and actually trying to bring those two modes of writing together, ended up just reasserting their difference. But then she adds: how could I promise not to try to do it again, because the trying was so pleasurable. She's not saying she won't do it again, even though she knows it's going to be a failure. I feel like that's a good way of describing what we've done together isn't it? It's like, the film and the poetry have ended up reasserting their differences through the process of us trying to find the common ground between them.