

## ***SHIZENGAKE [BIWA/BIWAKO]:***

### **SONIC COMPLEMENT, COUNTERPOINT OR INTERPENETRATION?**

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#### INTRODUCTION

It was with great enthusiasm that I responded to Naomi Matsumoto's invitation to collaborate with painter Shuji Okada. Despite my ignorance regarding his aesthetics or the environmental context from which he has been sourcing his images (i.e. Lake Biwa), I was immediately aware core themes resonated strongly with my interests. Shorelines form a recurring location for my site-based projects, natural history and the efficacy of environmental arts are a pressing concern of mine, and in tandem with my hermetic compositional practice, collaboration and intermedia are creative situations I strive for, notwithstanding a zest for intercultural communication and misunderstandings inspired by the likes of Chiang Yee<sup>1</sup> and Elias Canetti.<sup>2</sup> The suggestion of this particular configuration of intermedia also reinvigorated an interest I had in sonic responses to painting, sparked in my formative years. In 1997 writer Alaric Sumner (1952-2000) invited me to collaborate with him on a series of works in response to an exhibition of the paintings of the 'abstract' artist Sandra Blow (1925-2006), another painter, whose work, once relocated to St Ives from London, suggested an indelible trace of the shore. This paper charts salient threads of my practice and how they featured and evolved in my sonic art work for this project entitled *Shizengaku: Biwa/ Biwako*.

#### Core Practice

If I were to endeavor to characterize the foundation of my artistic practice, that solid ground that I return to, I would tacitly cite the craft (a mesh of 'skill, commitment and judgment')<sup>3</sup> of *musique concrète* (today often referred to as acousmatic music), a phenomenology-orientated compositional approach, pioneered by Pierre Schaeffer (after Husserl) and Pierre Henry in the

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<sup>1</sup> Yee Chiang, *The Silent Traveller in Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Voices of Marrakesh: A Record of a Visit* (London: Penguin, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 9.

late 40s early 50s. At the time of developing this approach Schaeffer announced on May 15, 1948:

I have coined the term *Musique Concrète* for this commitment to compose with materials taken from “given” experimental sound in order to emphasize our dependence, no longer on preconceived sound abstractions, but on sound fragments that exist in reality and that are considered as discrete and complete sound objects, even if and above all when they do not fit in with elementary definitions of music theory.<sup>4</sup>

Accompanying this new approach to handling sound in composition, was an insistence on a rarefied form of close listening, where the causal, cultural and associative traits are put to one side, encouraging the composer to deal with what is intrinsic in the sound itself, and how it is perceived – zooming-in on gestalts of sound in order to exploit their inherent grain and texture in relation to corresponding auditory perception. This approach provokes a sense of play through a responsive listening in ‘dialogue with physical materials’.<sup>5</sup> The composition is built up through a combination of sculpting, collage and montage with the actual sound materials.

Zooming-out from this close listening, of equal importance to my practice is environmental soundscape awareness, represented by the interdiscipline of acoustic ecology. This approach brings into play methods of field recording and soundwalking to explore listening *in situ*. This in turn helps expose socio-cultural percepts of the sounds around us, enabling an embodied/ place-full listening, which is customarily eschewed by *musique concrète*.

To infuse my hermetic compositional practice, which is governed by the strictures of the aesthetics of associated genres and influence of cornerstone works, I intentionally shakeup my core practice through collaboration. With collaboration I do not completely dispense with my compositional identity, but I take side steps towards the aesthetics and genre that I am engaging with.

## THE SOUND OF PAINTING

History tells us of a fluctuating, sometimes converging and often idiosyncratic, cooperation between music and the visual arts. Mussorgsky’s piano score *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874)

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Schaeffer, *In Search of a Concrete Music*, trans. C. North and J. Dack (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Sennett, *The Craftsman*, 273.

comes to mind as an archetype in the field, as the composer-cum-curator takes us on a journey in music through a ‘virtual’ exhibition of 10 of Viktor Hartmann’s paintings. Mussorgsky provides movement per painting, with the recurring *Promenade* theme offering musical continuity, as the viewer passes from painting to painting. The conceit of the composer offers the music in place of the paintings.

Many of the oft-quoted characters in this field are referred to as synaesthetes. Artists and composers such as Messiaen, Kandinsky, Scriabin, alike have exploited their unique yet consistent involuntary sensual association between colour and sound/ sound and colour, harnessing what today is understood as a neurological condition, as a creative resource.

Favoring physical manifestation for idiosyncratic cross-modal perception, the visible trace of sound waves as displayed in the dancing water patterns (crispations) in the Chinese spouting bowl, has motivated a range of artists. This phenomenon, known as cymatics or Chladni figures, was expounded by Ernst Chladni (after Robert Hooke). It has inspired a series of photograms by Susan Derges, *Chaldni* (1985) and provided the composer Alvin Lucier’s in *The Queen of the South* (1972) with an elemental visualization of the modes of vibration on a rigid surface of the performer’s acoustic vibrations.

Accompanying this quest for seeing sound and listening to image, in a more open cultural exchange between composer and artist, we think of the correspondence between Kandinsky and Schoenberg, Feldman and Rauschenberg and Rothko, and the influence that Calder’s mobiles had on the New York scene of composers. The model of collaborative practice that John Cage and choreographer Merce Cunningham practiced further extends the customary causal audiovisual contract, instead working with a shared Zen ethos (after D. T. Suzuki) of ‘unimpededness and interpenetration’:<sup>6</sup>

The two arts take place in a common place and time, but each art expresses this Space-Time in its own way. The result is an activity of interpenetrations in time and space, not counterpoints, nor controlled relationships, but flexibilities as are known from the mobiles of Alexander Calder.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John Cage, *Silence: Lectures & Writings* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1987), 46.

<sup>7</sup> John Cage and Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage, Writer: selected texts* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1993), 91.

## OUT OF IMAGE

My initial exploration into the juxtaposition of painting and music in my own practice resulted in a collaborative performance work with poet Alaric Sumner, *out of image (Sandra Blow)* (1997). Alaric had already embarked on extensive research into and contemplation on Blow's paintings, drawn together his book *Waves on Porthmeor Beach: A Diary* (1995). Blow worked in one of the Porthmeor studios, which provided a view of the sea across Porthmeor beach. Alaric explored the relationship of the environment that she was situated and the lines and shapes and materials (including sand) that were present in her work, leading to questioning the nature of suggested representation at play in the work of this leading abstract artist.

Alaric and I worked on a project in response to Blow's exhibition in the New Millennium Gallery in St Ives. Alaric wrote texts on many of the paintings, and I endeavored to respond to them in sound. I am not aware of experiencing synaesthetic perception myself – a Messiaenic approach was not going to work for me. My initial plan therefore, was to record sounds of the prevailing environment, waves, seagulls, wind and so on; however, I very quickly realized that this direct form of mechanical representation did not accord with the level of abstraction implied in the canvases. The completed movements that I generated, focused much more on the layers, textures, lines, rhythm, space and shapes, imbibed from many hours in front of the canvases and in dialogue with Alaric's interpretative musings. In addition to this more abstract way of working, my movements maintained a sense of atmosphere that I drew from the paintings imbedded in the location. Following the performance, tellingly, Sandra Blow's commented that she felt the 'paintings got in the way'.

## SHORELINE

Continuing a curiosity in the shoreline as site for fieldwork, instigated in *out of image (Sandra Blow)*, I have now worked on numerous projects by the coast. The majority of projects have been field recording based, with an interest in documenting natural history, most extensively in Mai Po Marshes in Hong Kong, a Ramsar site managed by the WWF. With such a project there is an educational onus on me to communicate the awe inspiring yet highly threatened calls of wildlife in the midst of the global metropolis of Hong Kong and Shenzhen.

In contrast, a dance collaboration with choreographer Tony Thatcher, in *–Scape [Goodwin Sands]* (2006-10), our approach was to read the textures of the sands. The surface of the tidal sandbank, Goodwin Sands, is replete with intricate details and characteristics, resembling a micro-topography seen from above in a passing jet crossing great mountains and plateaus. Yet this topography's transient lifespan is determined by the tide, mandala-like as the rich patterns of rivulets, ridges, gullies, planes and troughs, generated by the water's rhythmic actions of currents and eddies, is undermined and effaced by the oncoming tide. By gently dragging a hydrophone (waterproof microphone) over the sands, I was able to capture an inscription of the sands surface, the sand functioning as musical score. In conjunction with these readings I again, like in *out of image*, responded to the ambiance of the location.

Fundamental to all my projects is quite simply the sensuous multi-modal experience of 'being there', ideally over an extended period of time, allowing for seasonal variation. The method of 'being there' is echoed in the writings on perceptual ecology of Mitchell Thomashow, who calls for a phenomenologically routed perception of one's immediate surroundings: 'this type of intimate relationship demands proximity and attentiveness'.<sup>8</sup>

Crucially, this is not an exclusively phenomenological method:

What you directly observe is amplified by a solid foundation in natural history, and given further grounding when supported by the framework of scientific ecology.<sup>9</sup>

I certainly aim for this informed, yet human-scaled approach to fieldwork and seek for a 'mesh [of] sensory, aesthetic, and scientific observations'.<sup>10</sup>

#### TUNING INTO BIWAKO

It is with the above background that I embarked on the Shizengaku project. Accordingly with regards to fieldwork I had two subjects to study: the paintings of Shuiji Okada his aesthetics, methods, ethos, and the subject mater of his paintings in hand, the shoreline of Lake Biwa, like Mai Po a WWF managed Ramsar site.

An initial visit to Okada's studio in Spring of 2012 with colleagues Anthony Pryer and Naomi Matsumoto was an ideal springboard into the middle of Okada's working methods. Pryer interrogated Okada's practice and Okada generously responded. I remained quiet at this meeting, soaking in the environment and the discussion. I was able to see the images I would

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<sup>8</sup> Mitchell Thomashow, *Bringing the Biosphere Home: Learning to Perceive Global Environmental Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), 75.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

be working with, including some which had been completed. I was immediately impressed by the actual physical scale of the images and was fascinated by the sense of perspective and depth of field, through the weaving in and out of foreground and background. We learnt of Okada's use of high-definition photography in his fieldwork and this was followed up to a trip with the group to the locations by the shoreline of Lake Biwa where he has been collecting these images. Later in the day I spent several hours by myself exploring this ancient lake (regarded by the WWF as one of the oldest lakes in the world) from early afternoon to dusk. From my past experience of shoreline fieldwork, Biwako's main difference was its lack of obvious tide, suggesting a stillness that I was unacquainted with.

Equipped with a range of microphones, including an omnidirectional pair of condensers, and hydrophones, taking the soundscape composition approach, I collected ambient recordings by the side of Lake Biwa. I was able to collect nuanced and subtle textures of the environment, bird calls, dogs barking, lapping of water, wind in the reeds, even an electronic tone rendition of Paul McCartney's *Yesterday*, which echoed across the lake signaling the end of the working day, but in all of my recordings there is the omnipresence of traffic noise. I tried hard to get as far as I could from the road that encircled the lake, but it was impossible to evade its presence. For my ears it was noteworthy, due to the preponderance of Toyota, Honda and Mitsubishi hybrid vehicles – a novelty from my daily listenings of London traffic, but its noise-based sonic imprint was masking the subtle sounds that I was seeking. Before sunrise the following day we visited a number of locations surrounding the lake. They were stunning to witness, but once again, traffic sound dominated – in fact I perceived it as louder, perhaps due to the amount of heavy goods opting for nocturnal travel.

Okada's images represent a pristine, non-human environment. In the canvases we see a few squared centimeters of location *ex situ* – cut out of the location, segregated, and blown up to a visually immersive scale. We can imagine this scene continuing and extending beyond the frame of the area depicted, giving the image 'a sense of boundlessness, unfixedity, distance'.<sup>11</sup> We do not, however, spy the human detritus of leisure strewn around this industrious lake such as half sunken discarded canoes, or the surrounding traffic, elements that one may actually observe if the camera lens zooms out, or pulls away, panning beyond the fixed coordinates and magnification *in situ*. Auditory space, however, is 'not pictorial space, boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by

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<sup>11</sup> Alaric Sumner, *Waves on Porthmeor Beach: A Diary* (London: Words Worth Books, 1995), 48.

moment'.<sup>12</sup> And the traffic noise is an actuality of the lake's soundscape, and however directional and sensitive, the microphone refuses to ignore it.

#### BIWA AS SITE

Generally unsatisfied with my field recordings as a compositional resource, I reticently suggested to Matsumoto in passing that maybe I should record a biwa, a Japanese four stringed lute. I had overheard Pryer discussing the mythological link between Lake Biwa and the biwa instrument the day before, and this had penetrated by consciousness. My reticence was due to an awareness of the legacy of cultural imperialism of Western composers on traditional music, most notoriously in Stockhausen's *Telemusik* (1966), and the biwa is a socially sophisticated instrument, but as I have since learnt of the deep connection with the lake and the instrument, perhaps it was not such a bad idea after all. At the time of making the work I did not know of Takemitsu's reliance and studio treatments of the biwa for his austere and harsh sound design for Kobayashi's film *Kwaidan* (1964), including the ghost story of the biwa player 'Hoichi, the Earless'. The use of the biwa is so poised and archetypal, that I am grateful to my naivety, allowing me to do something else.

With trepidation and reverence we met several biwa players in a short space of time, who had generously given their skills and knowledge to the project. They allowed me to explore the instruments through very close mic-ing of the strings to capture the grain of spectral detail of gestures such as sliding glissandi, and unconventional means of making the instruments vibrate, including different plectrum. This method of sound recording is a standard process in *musique concrète*. The biwa became a micro-site of exploration. Still thinking of the paintings, I was excited with the woodiness of the instruments, made of wood from the Empress and Mulberry tree. We sonically activated this woodiness by knocking the device at different part of its body. I also learnt of the relationship of the music tablature and its association with traditional Japanese elements, including wood and water. As well as biwa I also recorded some Sho, another traditional instrument that also pertained mythological links to the lake.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Marshall McLuahn and Edmund Carpenter, 'Acoustic Space', in *Explorations in Communications: an Anthology*, ed. McLuahn, M. and E. Carpenter (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 66.

<sup>13</sup> Lake Biwa is often likened to the biwa instrument while Chikubuzima Island (the second biggest island within the lake) to the Sho. The Sho is an instrument which can create the sound of a sunbeam, and the island is the legendary birthplace of the Japanese indigenous Sun God.

## BIWA/BIWAKO

By the time I sat down to work in the studio on the sounds, I had spent considerable time by the lake and on front on the canvases. Now I needed to respond to both in an apposite manner. These two rich sources of material, Biwako and biwa provided me with great scope, to then approach the paintings. Getting away from the location recordings of the lake, to more *musique concrète* like material of the biwa recordings, reminded me of ways of working I had adopted in *out of image* and *-scape*.

From my extrapolations of the paintings I developed a range of sonic analogues to Okada's painterly marks:

- Magnification
- Elongation
- Spectromorphology (timbre/ chiaroscuro)
- Reflection / Echo / Delay
- Refraction (change in medium)
- Diffraction (impacted on obstacles)

I also thought about the juxtaposition of a photographic fixing of time and light, within my own time-based:

- surface tension
- perturbation (alteration)
- development, evolution (form/ structure)

In combination with the above themes I also drew on my memory of the atmosphere of the lake, and like previous projects aimed to evoke that memory of that place and my reading of atmosphere of the paintings.

True to my experience of the lake, the final installation also included a layer of the environmental sound recordings – that at times interrupt and disturb the flow and feel of a pictorial world devoid of human presence.

## CONCLUSION

I never sought to duplicate or compliment in sound what the paintings already have achieved – there is no need; they are complete. I aimed to respond to Okada's aesthetics and ethos, and to the actuality of the lake's soundscape, without giving up my core practice. In the installation the sound is neither independent nor interdependent of the image, but offers a counterpoint.



I am forever grateful to Okada's invitation, as I am brutally aware of how sound can influence what we see, as pioneering and leading sound designer Walter Murch articulate, as a rule to thumb:

Whatever virtues sound brings to the film are largely perceived and appreciated by the audience in visual terms - the better the sound, the better the image.<sup>14</sup>

The opposite is also true. I trust that my endeavours did not diminish the experience of the paintings. But this is not film music, and in deference to Cage, I hope the two forms of composition and painting functioned in an expansive space of harmonious 'unimpededness and interpenetration'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Murch, 'Forward' to Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, trans. C. Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), viii.

<sup>15</sup> Cage, *Silence: Lectures & Writings*, 78.