



舞台芸術国際共同制作事業
INTERNATIONAL CREATIONS IN PERFORMING ARTS

The Japan Foundation
FY2023 International Creations in
Performing Arts

Process Observer Reports

Preface

The Japan Foundation's project to promote international creations in performing arts has entered its third year. This year, four highly unique works were produced.

In addition to supporting efforts by Japanese and overseas artists to create new performing arts productions through exchange, the program also focuses on an observer system to record the processes from the early stages of production to the performances through third-party perspectives and to make them more visible. Reports by the observers who tracked the creative process of each work have once again been compiled this year.

This year also newly featured overseas creations and performances, resulting in works with completely different production processes that showcase the diversity of performing arts.

By shining a spotlight behind the scenes of international co-productions, which are also opportunities for international exchange, these reports are aimed at demonstrating the richness and potential of exchange through performing arts in the modern era and, at the same time, contributing to the further development of international exchange projects between Japanese and overseas artists by recording and sharing the details of implemented projects.

The Japan Foundation March 2024

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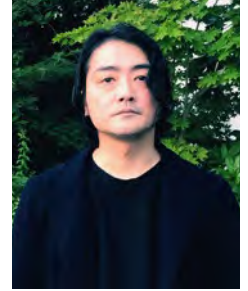
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Observer Profiles

SHIBUYA Keiichiro & Justine EMARD, Appassionato (France)
Shibuya Keiichiro's Android Opera "MIRROR"

FUJIKAWA Takahiro

Born in 1980. After graduating from the Faculty of Environment and Information Studies at Keio University, he worked for companies such as a publisher, a communication satellite channel operator, and an advertising production company before going independent in 2017. Since then, he has engaged in the writing, editing, production, and direction of various content. From August 2020 to February 2024, he joined the cultural platform *TOKION* as a contributing editor. He wrote articles related to various cultural fields for the platform, as well as the regular feature "Massive Life Flow: Inside the Mind of Keiichiro Shibuya," which followed the activities of musician SHIBUYA Keiichiro.



ISHIGAMI Natsuki & Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN (Thailand)
Parallel Normalities "Whispering Blue
– I heard your voice from the back of a blue car"

FUJISUE Moe

Born in 1987 in Kobe. She has resided in Taipei, Taiwan, since 2022. In 2016, she joined the management of PARADISE AIR, an artist-in-residence program in Matsudo City, Chiba Prefecture. She also works on management and public relations for art and urban development projects as a freelancer. She worked on the production management of *Beach, Eyelids, and Curtains: chelfitsch's EIZO-Theater* (Contemporary Art Museum Kumamoto, 2018) and on public relations for the Tokyo performance of *Pratthana - A Portrait of Possession* (Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre, 2019).



Photo by KATO Hajime

ARAKI Masamitsu, TSUKAHARA Yuya & Wichaya ARTAMAT (Thailand)
"Juggle & Hide (Seven Whatchamacallits in Search of a Director)"

YAMAZAKI Kenta

Born in 1983. Critic and dramaturge. He is the editor in chief of the theatrical review *Shihai* and writes regular short reviews for the web magazine *artscape*. In 2019, he formed the theatrical unit "y/n" with director and actor HASHIMOTO Kiyoshi. The group's major works include *Coming Out Lessons* (2020) and *Education (in your language)* (2022) at the Tokyo Festival Farm 2022 Farm-Lab Exhibition.



Photo by YAMAHATA Takuya

SHIRAGA Momoko & Lattanakone INSISIENGMAY (Laos)
"Asian Object Theater:
Laos-Japan Collaboration among Deaf and Hearing Performers"

TANAKA Miyuki

Curator and producer. She produces exhibitions, performances, and various projects under the theme of "disability as a perspective that redefines the world." She attempts to interpret the way we perceive expressions with the audience including people with disabilities. Her recent projects include the film *NIGHT CRUISING* (2019), the work-in-progress *Watching Dance with Creative Audio Descriptions* (KAAT Kanagawa Arts Theatre, 2017-2019), the exhibition *Rules? (21_21 DESIGN SIGHT, 2021)*, and the exhibition *Ways of Telling* (Tokyo Shibuya Koen-dori Gallery, 2021). From July to December of 2022, she conducted research in New York as a visiting scholar at the New York University Center for Disability Studies with a fellowship from the Asian Cultural Council.



Shibuya Keiichiro's Android Opera “MIRROR”

SHIBUYA Keiichiro & Justine EMARD, Appassionato (France)

Android Opera is a new form of opera with an android singer, conceived and composed by SHIBUYA Keiichiro, who has been active in Japan and abroad working in various genres encompassing cutting-edge electronic music, piano solos, film scores, and operas.

This work, *MIRROR* (performed at the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris), is based on the collaboration between an android, an orchestra, Buddhist music and chanting with 1,200 years of history, and electronic sounds that Shibuya unveiled at Expo 2020 Dubai in 2022. The android “Alter4,” which has been evolved further since the Dubai performance, is joined by French orchestra Appassionato and visual artist Justine EMARD for an international coproduction with new staging and music.

Having made remarkable advances, the android not only sings to music composed by Shibuya but also improvises its own melodies on the spot in response to the Buddhist chanting, with lyrics derived from interpretation of the chanted texts by the AI program GPT, which is currently drawing attention worldwide. The android also sings texts with excerpts from *The Possibility of an Island*, written by French novelist Michel HOUELLEBECQ, and Austrian philosopher Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN's last work *On Certainty*.

Visuals created by Emard, real-time projection of the android onto a screen, and lighting are also synchronized with the music onstage to immerse the entire theater in sound and visuals. By combining cutting-edge technology with traditional artforms, the work explores a new model for harmony between humans and technology through art.



SHIBUYA Keiichiro ©Ayaka Endo



Justine EMARD ©Shin Suzuki

Outline of Performances

Schedule: 8:00 p.m. on Wednesday, June 21, 9:00 p.m. on Thursday, June 22, and
8:00 p.m. on Friday, June 23, 2023

Duration: 70 min.

Venue: Théâtre du Châtelet (Paris, France)



Appassionato ©Rémi Rière

Credits

Concept, composition, piano, electronics: SHIBUYA Keiichiro

Vocal: Android Alter4 (Belongs to Osaka University of Arts)

Buddhist chant “Koyasan Shomyo”: FUJIWARA Eizen,
YAMAMOTO Yasuhiro, KASHIHARA Taiko, TANI Hoshin,
KAMETANI Shoei

Orchestra: Appassionato

Video creation: Justine EMARD

Android programming: IMAI Shintaro

Android design: ISHIGURO Hiroshi

Orchestration: SHIBUYA Keiichiro

Sound design: SUZUKI Yuki

Production sound engineer: Unisson Design

Light design: UEDA Go

Android real-time projection: KONISHI Kotaro

Stage Manager: OZAKI So

Assistant of Justine Emard: Bérangère POLLET,

Thomas ZADERATZKY

Assistant of production: OGAWA Shigeru

Direction of production: MATSUMOTO Natsumi

Support: LVMH, MIRAILAB BIOSCIENCE Inc.

Assistance: Fondation Franco-Japonaise Sasakawa, EU JAPAN FEST

Special cooperation: Art Science Department, Osaka University of Arts

Production cooperation: ANDROID AND MUSIC SCIENCE LABORATORY (AMSL),
SONY CSL, Communication Design Center

Backing: Tokyo Metropolis, Embassy of Japan in France, Comité d'Échanges Franco-Japonais

Organized by: Théâtre du Châtelet, ATAK

Co-Organized by: The Japan Foundation

Co-Produced by: Théâtre du Châtelet, ATAK, The Japan Foundation

Planning and production: ATAK



Photo by Claude GASSIAN

SHIBUYA Keiichiro & Justine EMARD, Appassionato (France) Shibuya Keiichiro's Android Opera "MIRROR" First Report: Project Background & Production Process, Part 1 (Japan) FUJIKAWA Takahiro

Background to the Coproduction

The android opera *MIRROR* will be staged for three days beginning on June 21, 2023, at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, established in 1862. The work was conceived and composed by musician SHIBUYA Keiichiro, who will also play the piano and electronic music for the performances.

Android opera is Shibuya's performing arts and musical project that began with *Scary Beauty*, which had its world premiere in 2018. Its defining feature is the fact that an android takes center stage as the "star." *MIRROR*, Shibuya's latest work, had its world premiere in March 2022 at Expo 2020 Dubai, where the android "Alter4" was joined by performers of Koyasan Shomyo, Buddhist chanting with 1,200 years of history, and a local orchestra. The work's harmony across space and time and its vision of concordance and coexistence between disparate elements produced many responses. While the Paris performances of *MIRROR* to be held next June will be based on the performance in Dubai, they will feature new music and updated staging and will be international coproductions with the participation of Parisian orchestra Appassionato and visual artist Justine EMARD.

Opera is a form of expression that was born during the Renaissance, when humanism came to the foreground, and can be said to epitomize the traditions of Western music and art. By introducing the nonhuman presence of an android born from cutting-edge technologies and Buddhist chanting, a kind of Eastern religious music, as "outsiders" to this artform, *MIRROR* illuminates new possibilities for expression and society. Thus, the impact of staging the work at the historic Théâtre du Châtelet is massive, and the performances are highly anticipated worldwide.

A Posthuman Opera for the End Times of Humanity

I would like to start by briefly discussing the significance of staging *MIRROR* in the current era, as well as the possibilities represented by the work.

It goes without saying that we humans currently stand at an unprecedented turning point. The ever-accelerating evolution of AI, robotic technology, and bioengineering are bringing about a massive shift in the concept and existence of humanity. At the same time, steadily worsening environmental issues such as climate change, as well as conflicts that show no sign of ceasing more than half a century after the end of World War II, cast a dark shadow over humanity's future. According to Italian philosopher and feminist theoretician Rosi BRAIDOTTI, the concept and existence of humans and the humanities are in their dying days, and this posthuman condition makes critically reframing humanity from a new perspective a pressing issue.

...We need to devise new social, ethical, and discursive schemes of subject formation to match the profound transformations we are undergoing. That means that we need to learn to think differently about ourselves.¹

Reexamining our existence as humans and considering different ways of being—Shibuya Keiichiro's latest android opera *MIRROR* presupposes awareness of these issues and takes a posthuman critical perspective nurtured by the "end times of humanity." As audience members, we will surely witness the potential opened up outside modern conceptions of humanity and identity and the possibilities that dwell in the space between humans and technology.

I will describe Shibuya's residency at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris from March to May of 2023 as well as the Japanese rehearsals held on May 19 and 20 in this report and the onsite rehearsals held in June at the Théâtre du Châtelet in my second, including comments from Shibuya and his collaborators. In my third and final report, I will discuss the vision delineated by the performances and the possibilities they express in line with their content, along with sharing some of the local reactions.

Residency at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris

One point that ought to be mentioned is the close relationship between Shibuya and the Théâtre du Châtelet, which goes back about ten years. Shibuya staged *The End*, an opera featuring the Vocaloid avatar Hatsune Miku and no human performers, at the Théâtre du Châtelet in 2013. It was a huge success, with all three days of performances selling out and the audience overflowing beyond the theater's capacity. The following year, Shibuya signed artist-in-residence agreements with both the Théâtre du Châtelet and the Palais de Tokyo, respectively, and began his stay in Paris. For the next approximately three years, he worked out of a studio in the Théâtre du Châtelet. Thus, this production marks his return to the theater after about six years. Furthermore, as Shibuya often explains, it was a conversation with then-theater director Jean-Luc CHOPLIN after the staging of *The End* that inspired the concept of an android opera. In that sense, the staging of *MIRROR* at the Théâtre du Châtelet cannot help but invoke a certain sense of inevitability and destiny.

Thus, in March 2023, Shibuya began working out of a studio specially installed inside the Théâtre du Châtelet. In restaging *MIRROR* at the historic theater, Shibuya wanted to "make the orchestral part stronger," and he set out composing new music in conjunction with overhauling the orchestral arrangement of the existing music.

During his about three-month residency, Shibuya finished composing and arranging all of the music for the Paris performances, except for one new composition planned as the final piece. In early May, he returned to Japan temporarily for rehearsals.

Japanese Rehearsals at Osaka University of Arts

On May 19 and 20, rehearsals were held at the Android and Music Science Laboratory of Osaka University of Arts. The laboratory had been established in April 2022, and Shibuya was involved in running it. The rehearsals were mainly conducted by Shibuya and the five Shomyo

chanters led by FUJIWARA Eizen; computer musician IMAI Shintaro, who had been responsible for all of the system development for Alter including its singing and movements since the opera *Super Angels* (world premiere in 2021) for the New National Theatre, Tokyo; and SUZUKI Yuki, who had served as the sound engineer for Shibuya's recent performances and installations.

Adhering to the order of music in the performances, the first rehearsal on May 19 began on time at 2 p.m. with the opening piece "MIRROR." This piece starts out with atmospheric electronic sound, and then the orchestra, chanting, and Alter's singing are overlaid in sequence. Before Fujiwara and the others begin chanting, a conch shell is blown. Shibuya gave the following directions with regard to the timing and playing style.

Although the orchestra, android, and Shomyo chanting may seem far removed from one another, they're actually not—they have commonalities. That's one of the messages I want to convey through *MIRROR*. There are actually similarities between the sound of a trombone playing a glissando and that of a conch. I want to symbolically represent the work's theme by overlaying these two sounds.

In the subsequent parts, Shibuya continued to quickly and carefully give directions tinged with inevitability based on the work's concept. Fujiwara and the others adjusted their performances with an accurate grasp of his intent, allowing the rehearsal to proceed smoothly.

In *MIRROR*, disparate elements mingle while maintaining their foreignness, creating an alternative harmony. How does Fujiwara, the inheritor of Buddhist music with 1,200 years of history, perceive this highly idiosyncratic sound and the work itself? When I asked him, he explained that the state of disparate elements harmonizing and coexisting is nothing less than the embodiment of the prayers for world peace that he expresses with his chanting, and that he finds the staging of such a work in Paris, crossing national borders, to be very significant.

In addition to the structure and progression of the music, the quality and balance of the sound were also important aspects to be verified in the rehearsals. Shibuya gave feedback to Imai and Suzuki regarding Alter's singing for each piece, considering factors such as the sense of isolation from the orchestra and electronic track, as well as the balance of impressions created by the android's singing to represent the nonhuman. In response, they made improvements such as adjusting Alter's programming and vocal effects in Imai's case or the bandwidth processing and compression of the mixer in Suzuki's case.

Suzuki also optimized the sense of saturation produced when the orchestra and electronic sound intermingle through channel adjustment and bandwidth processing while engaging in discussions with Shibuya.

After that, all of the planned pieces were finished, and the first day of rehearsals came to a successful close. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the following day, but when I saw Shibuya at a later date, he informed me that the second day of rehearsals had also ended successfully: "We were able to fully achieve everything we could while in Japan."



Onsite rehearsals at the Théâtre du Châtelet would begin on June 18. I will describe these in my second report.

1 Rosi BRAIDOTTI, *The Posthuman* (Polity Press, 2013), 12



SHIBUYA Keiichiro & Justine EMARD, Appassionato (France) Shibuya Keiichiro's Android Opera "MIRROR" Second Report: Production Process, Part 2 (France)

FUJIKAWA Takahiro

From the Completion of the Final Piece to Theatrical Rehearsals

Following the Japanese rehearsals, SHIBUYA Keiichiro returned to Paris in the latter half of May and resumed working out of his studio in the Théâtre du Châtelet. After he successfully completed "LUST," the final piece of the performances that had still been unfinished at the time of his stay in March, onsite rehearsals at the Théâtre du Châtelet were held for three days from June 18 to 20. (I arrived in Paris on the evening of the 18th.)

How was the staging of this unusual opera starring an android received by the staff of the Théâtre du Châtelet? The theater's technical manager, Camille LABELLE, answered as follows.

Various productions and concerts are held at the Théâtre du Châtelet, so incorporating elements like electronics and video into an orchestra or staging a grand production is far from uncommon. But an android's a different story. The novelty of it is fascinating. Even though I'm currently discovering all sorts of things as we go through the rehearsals, it's curiosity rather than anxiety that has my heart racing.

What did Labelle think about the introduction of technology such as androids and AI into the world of performing arts and the future it would bring? She cited video as an example in sharing her views, while also prefacing that there are currently various arguments surrounding androids and AI and that it is difficult to draw any simple conclusions.

Previously, when video began to be used on stage, it stirred up various debates. In the end, some artists actively used video, while others rejected it and continued to stick with stage design using artisanal set pieces, so opinions never converged fully on either side. I suspect that this will also hold true for androids and AI, but when it comes to me personally, I feel like it could be a positive thing, in the sense that it leads to more options for creators.

Listening to Labelle, I sensed that android opera would have very exciting implications not only for audiences but also for those involved in the production of the performing arts.

Cocreation with Visual Artist Justine EMARD

A rehearsal involving the video projected onto a large screen behind the stage and the lighting section began at 9 a.m. on the 19th. Justine Emard, a Paris-based visual artist, was in charge of the video. She could appropriately be called a close ally of Shibuya's, having collaborated with him on an ongoing basis since 2013.

During the performances, Emard would be mixing 3D computer-generated imagery that she had created in advance with live camera footage of the stage focusing on Alter4 and the monks in real time and controlling the images projected onto the screen from a video mixer installed at the back of the top floor of the auditorium. What did she hope to convey through *MIRROR* and the Paris performances?

The video for *MIRROR* uses scenes of Mount Koyasan and images of the android and monks captured with 3D scanning technology and represents them as 3D computer graphics rather than actual footage. Here, my intention is to "create a virtual world by cutting out fragments of the real world." The biggest point of departure from the Dubai performance is that the Paris performances will have "scenarios." During "MIRROR," the opening piece, sandy, grainy monochrome images will transform into geometric images that seem to be blueprints for the android and AI. Then, in the subsequent pieces, the android and virtual world generated from the "blueprints" will react and blend with the various presences and music on the stage. During the final piece, "LUST," everything culminates in a richly colored mandala, representing the state of enlightenment in esoteric Buddhism, which soars off into the distance. As I discussed with Mr. Shibuya, this was the kind of storyline that I wanted to represent in the video.

Emard's video will three-dimensionally highlight the concepts of *MIRROR* and effectively convey them to audiences while blending with Shibuya's music and lyrical world. Listening to her, I realized that this ideal collaboration between music and video had been made possible by numerous "dialogues" over the course of many years.

Mr. Shibuya and I have been sharing an ongoing dialogue through our creative work ever since I first met him in 2013. In 2019, I handled the video for the project *Heavy Requiem*, a collaboration between his electronic music and FUJIWARA Eizen's chanting that was held at a church in Linz, Austria. *MIRROR* was built on these various foundations, so we're in collusion as a team. When it comes to this project, it feels more like we co-created it by assimilating our artistic visions, rather than that he approached me, and I responded with the video.

Cocreation with Parisian Orchestra Appassionato

The Paris-based, 47-member orchestra Appassionato arrived at the venue at 3 p.m. on the 19th, and rehearsals and sound checks, which included the sequencing of Alter's singing and the electronic sound, were conducted for each piece at a time.

Although Appassionato has played as part of various stage productions and concerts since its formation, this will be the orchestra's first time sharing the stage with an android vocalist. Harpist Léo DOUMÈNE, who serves as the orchestra's director, reflected on his excitement at joining the project and his feelings toward the work as follows.

When I first heard about the project, I remember being very excited to experience the uncharted scenario of sharing the stage with an android. At the same time, I also felt that an android sharing the stage with humans and starring in an opera is very “provocative” in a way and that by doing this, Mr. Shibuya is raising questions for the Western art and music world and, consequently, for society as a whole.

According to Doumène, he sensed significant implications in the phrase “the android’s emotions,” which Shibuya uttered while directing the rehearsal on the 18th.

At first, I found these words, “the android’s emotions,” a bit strange. However, I quickly interpreted them as what Mr. Shibuya wanted to emphasize and convey—that whether or not an android can develop emotions is the question he wants to pose as the theme of this work. I believe that stirring up and evoking emotions through music is the mission of a professional musician, so I decided to approach the musical performances in the work with a focus on how to elicit emotions from the android and express those emotions.

Fujiwara and the other four Koyasan monks joined at 8 p.m., and the day’s rehearsal ended with a run-through of all the sections, including the video.

Sound Design for an Unusual Opera

At 9 a.m. on the 20th, Shibuya and the sound system staff conducted sound checks from the audience seats. The production sound engineers for the performances were Cyril AUCLAIR and Léonard FRANÇON, who had also served as the production sound engineers for the 2013 performances of *The End* as staff members of the Théâtre du Châtelet and were now working together in their own company. I asked them about *MIRROR* from the perspective of sound design.

This work has many more layers than an ordinary opera. The synthesized voice of the android, the orchestra, the monks’ chanting, and the electronic sound...all of these layers need to find their “correct position” in the mix. We have to adjust the sound so that a clear message gets through to the audience in the theater while still respecting Mr. Shibuya’s arrangements. That’s why we chose to handle the different sounds individually using separate buses and to let the final mix develop naturally within the space of the theater. We also installed a lot of speakers in the theater and added even more speakers to the ceiling to achieve an immersive, clear sound.

A dress rehearsal was held on the night of the 20th. Before they began playing, Shibuya carefully explained in English to the members of the orchestra that the work explored the possibility of communication between humans and androids and that he therefore wanted them to play while looking at the android as much as possible. Following this final direction, a run-through was held, bringing the entire three-day rehearsal process to a close.



At this point, you may be wondering about local interest in the upcoming performances. Edouard DAGHER, the head of press service for the Théâtre du Châtelet, reflected on *The End* as an “innovative, monumental production” and informed me that as a work marking Shibuya’s return to the Théâtre du Châtelet, *MIRROR* was generating a great deal of interest among local journalists.

MIRROR utilizes the advanced technologies of androids and AI while also questioning their place in society. This makes it a contemporary work with deep topicality. In addition to stunning the sorts of theater journalists who normally frequent the Théâtre du Châtelet, it has also succeeded in capturing the attentions of journalists in other fields and is eliciting various reactions.

The premiere Paris performances of *MIRROR* approached while drawing attention in various circles. What were we, as audience members, about to experience?



SHIBUYA Keiichiro & Justine EMARD, *Appassionato* (France)
Shibuya Keiichiro's Android Opera "MIRROR"
 Third Report: Performances & Reflection
 FUJIKAWA Takahiro

The premiere Paris performances of *MIRROR* finally began on June 21. They were a success, the theater packed with men and women of various ages on all three days. In this report, I will discuss the vision of the work in line with the content of the performances, along with sharing some of the local reactions.

An Encounter between Decentered Humans and "Others" Transcending Space and Time

As soon as the curtain lifts at the start of the work, the audience is greeted by a dazzling sight. In the center of the stage, the android Alter4 gazes calmly at us with streaming light diffusing off of its silver body. Beside it, five Buddhist monks in shimmering brocade stoles face the android with their palms pressed together. Surrounded by the members of the magnificent orchestra holding their various instruments, the android and monks are "others" to the art form of (classical, standard) opera and to the modern European "humans." We are immediately drawn into the world of the work, a posthuman one in which humans are decentered.

Amid this extraordinary scene, Alter utters its first words to us: "Android is a mirror." Positioning the existence of the android birthed by humans as a "mirror," these words seem to call upon us to reexamine the human condition. The android continues, "Let's celebrate this new experience together," encouraging us to bear witness to new possibilities. What awaits us as audience members, and what hope does the work offer under posthuman conditions? To skip ahead to the conclusion, it is a new form of harmony nurtured by disparate elements, along with the possibilities opened up between humans and technology.

Similarity and Harmony among Disparate Elements

The futuristic android, the orchestra representing modernity and Europe, and the monks performing Buddhist chanting with 1,200 years of history—how will these others transcending space and time create harmony within the work? Here, the concept of similarity is key.

As I already noted, at the start of the titular piece "MIRROR" that opens the performances, the audience is in a state of visual and epistemological shock in front of a spectacle that could even be described as "bizarre." However, once we catch our breath and listen to the music that now fills the theater, we realize that the sound of the orchestra that began before the curtain came up and that of a conch shell blown by a monk are not as far removed as their appearances might suggest.

As I described in my first report, SHIBUYA Keiichiro has a conch that also sounds like a trombone glissando blown during the opening piece in



Photo by Thomas AMOUREUX

order to symbolically represent the message that “the various disparities in the world are, at their core, not actually so different, and similarities can be found.” This juxtaposition of auditory similarity and visual contrast guides us to new awarenesses and realizations.

Shibuya explains that this similarity despite differences is by no means limited to the musical aspects of the work and can be applied to various entities and concepts including East and West, male and female, and human and nonhuman.

Postmodern philosophy and art emphasize difference as criticisms of modern subjectivity and identity. However, what we need in the current era is to find closeness and similarities among disparate elements. I believe that this will reveal new forms of harmony and coordination.

It was this perspective of trying to create harmony by finding similarities that led Shibuya to the idea of “making the Buddhist chanting resemble the chorus in Mozart’s *Requiem*.” By positioning and timing the chanting appropriately within the piece based on this idea, Shibuya was able to make the orchestra and chanting sound harmonious despite being disparate entities.

Next, in the second piece, “Scary Beauty,” we finally hear the android sing. While it has been adjusted so as not to disrupt the overall sound thanks to sound design and mixing by IMAI Shintaro, SUZUKI Yuki, Cyril AUCLAIR, and Léonard FRANÇON, its singing contains many harmonic components and sounds nonhuman, vividly conveying to us the arrival of a new form of harmony. This harmony blending disparity and familiarity that fills the theater goes beyond the boundaries of music and illuminates the way to the coming society.

Possibilities Dwelling in the Space between Technology and Humans

Another key point of the work is the relationship between technology and humans. The work uses the generative pre-trained transformer (GPT) model of AI that has been continually shocking society with its rate of



Photo by Thomas AMOUROUX



Photo by Thomas AMOUROUX

evolution and potential. However, more notable than the GPT itself is the fact that Shibuya has turned his focus toward the creativity that develops between technology such as AI and humans.

One example is the interaction between technology and humans in the recitatives. The performances include three recitatives by Alter and the monks in between the musical pieces. The lyrics sung by Alter during these recitatives were generated as responses by training the GPT on the content of the chanting by FUJIWARA Eizen and the other monks. Thus, Alter provides a counterpart to the chanting, but its response is not only on a linguistic or semantic level. Thanks to an exclusive program developed by Imai, Alter is capable of improvising songs by responding to the pitch and volume of the monks’ chanting on a microtonal level. The sight of Alter unveiling “living expression” before his very eyes imbues Fujiwara’s chanting with even greater passion. These sessions transcending space and time as well as the boundary between the living and nonliving thoroughly convey to us the possibilities that dwell in the space between humans and technology.

The final main piece of the performances, “LUST,” also has intriguing implications for AI. Shibuya created the lyrics by training the GPT on The Seventeen Phrases of Purity, the first verse of *The Principles of the Perfection of Wisdom in One Hundred and Fifty Lines*, an esoteric



Photo by Thomas AMOUREUX

Buddhist sutra that urges “the affirmation of desire,” and then explaining to it the premise and concept of the performances featuring an android singer, as well as the composition of the orchestra, and asking what lyrics it would sing in the final piece. As a result, it generated deeply romantic lyrics wishing for the melting of the boundary between oneself and one’s beloved, starting with the first line, “You and I, to make our love for purity.” Shibuya was fascinated by this generation of lyrics with what might be called typically operatic themes and content that in a way run counter to the content of the input.

When creating lyrics with GPT, how you ask the questions is critical because it’s linked directly to the quality of the output. In that sense, AI can be called a “mirror” for humanity. However, what’s interesting is that it sometimes produces output beyond what humans can imagine or predict. KISHI Yuma, an artist with whom I collaborated on another project, creates art that treats AI as “alien intelligence” based on ideas espoused by Kevin KELLY, the founding editor of *Wired* magazine. I guess that my own feelings toward AI are similar to this.

According to Shibuya, the stimulus of the unpredictability generated by AI sometimes even influences his composing. This creative feedback loop, too, may point to some of the possibilities of humans and technology.

The lyrics sung by Alter in the work also contain excerpts from writings by novelist and poet Michel HOUELLEBECQ and philosopher Ludwig WITTGENSTEIN. In this sense as well, the work three-dimensionally

highlights the possibilities created by the intersection of AI and humans.

From “End” to “Beginning”

Finally, I would like to touch on how the android’s role in Shibuya’s artistic universe has changed since his first android opera, *Scary Beauty*. Although *Scary Beauty* had the same configuration, with the android standing in the center of the stage surrounded by the orchestra, it depicted and raised the question of a singularity situation in which an autonomous android determines the tempo and inflection of the music as a conductor, thereby unilaterally controlling the humans.

On the other hand, in *MIRROR*, as we have already seen, the android is given the role of creating new realizations and possibilities for humans as an alien “other.” Shibuya once referred to *Scary Beauty* as his “final music.” However, this work allows us to sense definite signs of a new beginning that will arrive after the end. After finishing the final piece, “LUST,” Shibuya plays “Scary Beauty” on the piano accompanied by Alter’s solo singing as an encore. Played and sung slowly as if confirming each other’s existence, the music sounds like a gospel blessing humanity as it heads toward a new beginning after the end.

Local Reactions to *MIRROR*

What did those involved in the production locally think about *MIRROR*? In the next section, I would like to look at some of the reactions of those who viewed the performances.

Olivier PY, who has served as director of the Théâtre du Châtelet since 2023, praised the progressiveness of the technology used in the work and the originality of its themes and approach.

Nowadays, AI is a hot topic not only in France but all over the world. However, I have never seen a work like this android opera before, and it shocked me. Having an android sing text by Ludwig Wittgenstein, a philosopher, and the fusion of such different forms of expression as an orchestra, an android, and electronic music make it a one-of-a-kind project.

Olivier also expressed high expectations for Shibuya's future activities. "When Shibuya Keiichiro staged *The End* at the Théâtre du Châtelet in 2013, he astonished and delighted audiences with an extraordinary work. Now, with this android opera, he has once again attempted a type of work that has never been produced before, demonstrating his unique talent. I hope he will continue to create fresh and unprecedented works."

Christophe BEZZONE, director of artistic production and coordinator for the Théâtre du Châtelet, praised the work for its multilayered temporality while also looking back on the theater's history.

The Théâtre du Châtelet has continually pursued innovation, such as when it staged *Petrushka* and *Parade* by the Ballets Russes. In that sense, *MIRROR* could be considered a work that naturally fits into our history. It is a remarkable work combining Shomyo chanting, an artform with 1,200 years of history, and a futuristic android.

Dominique LAULANNÉ, the artistic director of the Maison de la Musique de Nanterre, said: "How should humanity face the future? *MIRROR* is a work that represents this question. It could be described as a 'science-fiction opera,' and the experience of viewing it is like being transported into the future. I also found the work's theme of 'linking the past and future' to be a highly significant one."

In local media, a total of 23 newspapers and magazines including *Le Figaro* and *Le Parisien*, the radio channel France Musique, and five television channels including TV5MONDE and France 3 covered *MIRROR*, reporting on its innovativeness and topicality.

Although Shibuya reflected on the Paris performances as "the most difficult project of my career," it could safely be said that the results he achieved with them measured up to his hard work. As the global situation continues to become more chaotic, and technology continues to evolve at an accelerating pace, the actuality of the vision presented by the work will only increase. The fact that such a work was conceived by a Japanese artist, produced via a cross-border framework as an international coproduction, and staged in Europe by way of the Middle East has enormous implications both socially and artistically. I greatly hope that the harmony imagined by *MIRROR* will be realized on a broad scale in the future.



Photo by Claude GASSIAN

Parallel Normalities

“Whispering Blue – I heard your voice from the back of a blue car”

ISHIGAMI Natsuki & Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN (Thailand)

Parallel Normalities is a collaborative project by Japanese playwright ISHIGAMI Natsuki and Thai playwright/author Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN. As the culmination of this project, which the two artists had been creating through ongoing dialogue since 2021, “Whispering Blue – I heard your voice from the back of a blue car” was performed in Dansai District, Loei Province, Thailand (as part of Loei Art Fes 2023).

The work is an adaptation that Ishigami and Pramsumran jointly created based on the play “Ao ni Au,” which Ishigami produced in Kyoto in 2017. In the process, a Thai-Japanese production team conducted a study and residency in Dansai District of Loei Province in northeastern Thailand, the setting of the play, and Gotemba City, Shizuoka Prefecture, the hometown of photographer and cast member SUZUKI Ryuichiro.

The audience experienced the work by showing up at the times and places indicated in messages (the script) sent daily via LINE from “Fah.” Photos taken by photographer Ryu during the performances and a diary by researcher Tomo were posted daily on a special website.

Special website: <https://whisperingblue.wixsite.com/whisperingblue/en>



ISHIGAMI Natsuki ©Masashi Kuroha



Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN
©Rinrada Pornsombutsatien

Outline of Performances

Duration: Seven days (July 17 to 23, 2023)

Sites: Various points around the city center of Dansai district, Loei Province, Thailand

Credits

Written and Directed by: Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN

Inspired by “Ao ni Au” by ISHIGAMI Natsuki

Ryu’s Photos by: Suzuki Ryuichiro

Tomo’s Diary by: Shimoda Tomonori

Cast/Collaborator:

Ryu: SUZUKI Ryuichiro

Tomo: SHIMODA Tomonori

Beer: Arnuparp JANTAKAEW

Kean: Songsilp WANGDUM

P’Pu: Pornsadet JANCHAMCHOI

Som: Siwaporn PROMMAWAN

Preaw: Sirirat MEESOOK

Uncle Chalad: Chalad SRIKUMPHA

Doi: Kritsakorn KANICHAYANAN

Pus: Sirasit SENANUCH

Hong Cha café

Basketball club behind Srisongrak Wittaya School

Niyom Tamsang restaurant

Ban Phon Nhong community

Ta Cafe and Food

Produced by: TOMITA Chigusa

Curated by: Siree RIEWPAIBOON

Project Manager: KUWAHARA Hikaru

Coordinator: Kritsakorn KANITCHAYANAN

Assistant Producer: Wayla AMATATHAMMACHAD

Performance Script Translator: TOMITA Chigusa, KUWAHARA Hikaru

Tomo’s Diary Translator: Piyawan SAPSAMROUM, KUWAHARA Hikaru

Special thanks to: Jitsai BANCHON, everyone who supported this project in Dansai, Gotemba, and Shizuoka City, SAKAI Yukina

Organized by: Place and Narrative, Prayoon for Art Foundation

Co-Organized by: The Japan Foundation

Co-Produced by: Place and Narrative, Prayoon for Art Foundation, The Japan Foundation

Supported by: The Saison Foundation (International Projects Support Program)



Upper left: Photo by Arnuparp JANTAKAEW Middle and lower left: Photo by Suzuki Ryuichiro

ISHIGAMI Natsuki & Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN (Thailand)
**Parallel Normalities “Whispering Blue
 – I heard your voice from the back of a blue car”**
First Report: Background to the Coproduction
 FUJISUE Moe

Parallel Normalities *Whispering Blue – I heard your voice from the back of a blue car* (hereafter “*Whispering Blue*”) is a drama production performed over a week from July 17, 2023, using the entire town of Dansai District, Loei Province, Thailand, as its stage. With different stories unfolding in different places each day, the work allows the audience to immerse themselves in the world of the play, encountering the people, landscapes, and events of Dansai by temporarily joining the journey of the two characters, Ryu and Tomo. During the performance period, messages from “Fah*,” a guiding presence for everyone, could be received via LINE, informing the audience of the next day’s performance content, location, and time. Besides the script, photos by Ryu and diary entries by Tomo were released the day after each performance, allowing those not present to experience it vicariously. This production offered various ways to appreciate the work from different distances, not just by watching it in person. I highly recommend visiting the official *Whispering Blue* website for more information.

* Fah=ฟ้า: A Thai word meaning blue, light blue, or sky

Whispering Blue official website:

<https://whisperingblue.wixsite.com/whisperingblue/en>

- [Seven-day script](#) (released the day before each performance)
- [Ryu’s photos](#) (released after each performance)
- [Tomo’s diary](#) (released after each performance)

Whispering Blue, co-created by the two playwrights Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN and ISHIGAMI Natsuki, takes *Ao ni Au* (written by Ishigami Natsuki), which was presented in Maizuru City, Kyoto Prefecture, in 2017, and adapts it for performance in Dansai. First, let’s unravel how the overarching project “Parallel Normalities” and the play *Ao ni Au* became connected and found their way to this land.

“Parallel Normalities” is a project jointly undertaken by the Japanese NPO Place and Narrative and the Thai organization Prayoon for Art Foundation (hereinafter, Prayoon Foundation). The Prayoon Foundation engages in projects that bridge art and society, driven by local resources and communities, in various regions across Thailand. Among these, the international art festival “Loei Art Fes” was held for the first time in Dansai District, Loei Province, in 2021 as a pilot project aiming to build an art city model inspired by the Setouchi Triennale in Japan.

Located in the Isan region of northeastern Thailand, Dansai District in Loei Province is a town bordering Laos. Its traditions, culture, beliefs, and environment differ significantly from central regions like Bangkok or coastal areas like Phuket. The festival’s primary intended participants are those living and working in this area.



Figure 1: Scene from the performance. The blue, light blue, and sky seen at Huai Sok Reservoir in Dansai.



Figure 2:
Scene from Loei Art Fes 2021
(from the official website).



Although Loei Art Fes 2021 concluded in August 2021, a new project called “Parallel Normalities: Empowering regional cities with performing arts” was launched in December of that year with a view to continuing art projects in the same area. This project received international project support from the Saison Foundation, a public interest incorporated foundation that supports continuous international exchange projects (in this case, joint creation by Thai and Japanese playwrights) for up to three years. The performance of *Whispering Blue* in Dansai is one of the outputs of the “Parallel Normalities” project.

Introduced by Wayla AMATATHAMMACHAD, director of the Prayoon Foundation, and Siree RIEWPAIBOON, curator of the project, Nuttamon Pramsumran, a Thai playwright living near Bangkok, and Ishigami Natsuki, a Japanese playwright based in Shizuoka, met for the first time in December 2021. At that time, during the lengthy COVID-19 pandemic, travel from Thailand to Shizuoka was not possible, so their dialogue was conducted online for over a year. This sense of distance led to the idea of “letters.” In March 2022, a play by Pramsumran titled *Letter from Dansai* was presented as part of the Theatre TODAY project led by Place and Narrative in Shizuoka City.



Figure 3: Scene from the performance. On a hill overlooking Dansai.

Letter from Dansai is a text in the form of a letter written by Pramsumran when she visited the remote town of Dansai in Thailand for the first time, addressed to people in Shizuoka City whom she was supposed to meet. In the letter, she describes her astonishment at the landscape surrounded by mountains, the flowers blooming in the mountains and the town and their fragrances, her unexpected attendance at a wedding ceremony with a style different from those in the capital Bangkok, and how this beautiful, nature-rich place was a battleground in the movement toward democracy 50 years ago.

Since Theatre TODAY was an art project using radio and public spaces, this letter was delivered to the people of Shizuoka via radio. Radio listeners in Shizuoka could imagine faraway Dansai, write replies to the letter, and thus “perform” receiving the letter in their own lives. Theatre TODAY, the structure of which is that people living in a town “perform” in their daily lives with the town as the stage, was launched in Shizuoka City

by Japanese playwright Ishigami Natsuki, who served as its director until fiscal 2021.

Ishigami’s creation of *Ao ni Au* dates to 2017. Participating in the artist-in-residence program “Kyoto: Re-Search” conducted by Kyoto Prefecture, Ishigami stayed in Maizuru and created *Ao ni Au* together with the local community. Its premiere took place at the residence program’s exhibition “Daikyoto 2017 in Maizuru.” The premiere version of *Ao ni Au* was performed nonstop for two weeks from October 23 to November 5, 2017, as a play in which a fictional woman named Ao stays in the fictional M City and visits local people. The audience read or listened to the script, released through social media and various regional media, such as FM radio and the local newspaper’s posting column, and witnessed Ao’s 14-day stay by being at specific places on specific dates and times. The day after each performance, photographs taken by cast member and photographer SUZUKI Ryuichiro were released and archived on



Figure 4: Scene from the performance of *Ao ni Au* in Maizuru in 2017 (Photo by Suzuki Ryuichiro).

social media. It was a form of theater that could only be encountered in that particular place, created by Ishigami and the production team as a framework in which the work could be performed if the playwright, performers, and photographer came from outside the area. At this point, the work was already declared to be a prototype, suggesting the possibility of changing the region where it would be staged or having someone other than Ishigami write the script—in other words, the possibility of adaptations.

After its premiere, *Ao ni Au* awaited its next development for several years. The joint creation in “Parallel Normalities” was progressing as a completely separate project, but Typhoon No. 15, which struck Shizuoka Prefecture in September 2022, brought about a sudden turn of events. Ishigami, who lives in Shizuoka City, experienced a water supply cutoff and power outage due to typhoon damage. This firsthand encounter with the disaster made her turn her attention to rivers and water control. This triggered a confluence of recollections about Maizuru, a port town, and Dansai, through which flows the Mun River, which is indispensable for agriculture, leading to the creation of an adapted version of *Ao ni Au*.

In the adapted version, the production and performance initiative was handed over to the Thai side (Pramsumran and the Prayoon Foundation’s project team), and a system was set up for Ishigami to participate in the creation online. The script was written mainly by Pramsumran, with Ishigami contributing ideas and advice. The Prayoon Foundation’s project team, including curator Riewpaiboon and producer TOMITA Chigusa, handled the progress toward the local performance. Suzuki Ryuichiro, a photographer and performer, and SHIMODA Tomonori, a researcher (later a performer), also joined from Japan. Research in Dansai, which could be called the kickoff of the adapted version of *Ao ni Au*, was conducted in November 2022, two months after the arrival of Typhoon No. 15.

ISHIGAMI Natsuki & Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN (Thailand)
Parallel Normalities “Whispering Blue
– I heard your voice from the back of a blue car”
Second Report: Research in Thailand and Japan
 FUJISUE Moe

The adapted version of *Ao ni Au*, with its title later changed to *Whispering Blue – I heard your voice from the back of a blue car*, was announced as a participating work in Loei Art Fes 2023. The schedule for *Whispering Blue* and the festival itself was organized to coincide with the Phi Ta Khon Festival, a traditional bizarre festival held in Dansai. This festival is famous for its parade of people dressed in colorful masks and

costumes, but there are actually two types: a large-scale festival that is internationally publicized and a smaller version held by the local people of Dansai for themselves. The Loei Art Fes 2023 was scheduled to align with the small-scale festival and was held as an art festival emphasizing the local community. Since the dates of the Phi Ta Khon Festival are determined each year by the revelations of a shaman, meaning that the schedules of the artists and festival organizers are not taken into consideration, it was decided from the outset that ISHIGAMI Natsuki would be absent for the actual performances of *Whispering Blue*.

Due to the constraint of the Japanese playwright's absence even during the local research in Dansai, the research team seemed intensely conscious of becoming Ishigami's eyes and ears. SUZUKI Ryuichiro, assigned as a performer, made a record through his camera. SHIMODA Tomonori, who accompanied him as a researcher, observed Suzuki and



Figure 1: Scenes from the Phi Ta Khon Festival



Figure 2: Phi Ta Khon decorations can be found everywhere in the town of Dansai.

meticulously documented what he saw and heard in writing. By using these photos and notes each evening to discuss and share what they felt and saw, the team built up a common understanding. Another feature of the research here was the existence of short scripts in the form of daily instructions on where to go and what to do during their stay. These were written by Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN, based on Ishigami's suggestions and advice, following the method of *Ao ni Au*. It was meant to be a trial performance of travelers visiting Dansai and deepening their understanding of the place, accepting the coincidences that occurred while not being able to predict how things would unfold when visiting locations and meeting people based on instructions. Incorporating elements of performance into the research reportedly gave the entire team an understanding of the performance format and a sense that it could be put into practice in Dansai as well.

The creation team conducted this research not only in Dansai, Thailand but also in Gotemba City, Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan. I did not accompany the research team in Dansai but started joining them on the research trip in Gotemba in April 2023. At this point, there was no actual script by Pramsumran for the performance, only a simple plot, and the possibilities of "what would actually happen in Dansai" were almost infinite as the team visited various places in and around Gotemba. Observing the situation, my first impression was that the team had undergone quite an organic team building through their arduous day-and-night research in Dansai.

Gotemba is where Suzuki Ryuichiro, who plays the role of Ryu, was born and raised and is still based today. Suzuki is the only person who has continued to perform since the premiere version of *Ao ni Au*, and he shared with the team a highly defined understanding of "how it was in the premiere version." He also coordinated the research so that the team could meet various people, landscapes, and events in his hometown. At the same time, he held an exhibition titled "Several Journeys Around Ao," where he displayed photographs taken in Dansai and other places, creating opportunities for more people to have contact with the work.

Suzuki is a performer, but I felt that it was not enough to credit him simply as a "performer," as he was also a presence that brought a great deal of knowledge and experience to the creation of this work. Especially at the time of the Gotemba research, it was unclear what information was needed for Pramsumran's script writing and what matters would be adopted in the script. Amid this, it was impressive how Suzuki inputted a large amount of information to the team again and again, day after day. He explained the good water quality that benefited from the geology of Mt. Fuji while gazing at the mountain. He told the team about local beliefs about spring water and guided us to various limpid streams. He introduced them to his family, old friends met by chance, and local acquaintances, and shared meals with them. The research, which began with getting to know Gotemba, eventually delved into Suzuki's own background, delineating the character of Ryu more clearly in the process.



Figure 3: A scene of team discussion in Gotemba. Everyone looks at the photos taken by Suzuki and discusses what they felt that day. In Dansai, this was done every night.



Figure 4: Walking the route to school that Suzuki walked when he was an elementary school student



Figure 5: Viewing a cloud-covered Mt. Fuji



Figure 6: A woodland at the foot of Mt. Fuji



Figure 7: A mountain range seen from Gotemba. It was often mentioned that it resembles the mountains of Dansai.



Figure 8: A dinner party at the Suzuki family's yard using the distinctive Thai pot Mu Kratha

Like Suzuki, Shimoda, who manages the NPO Place and Narrative with Ishigami, also played a role beyond that of a performer. Originally participating as a researcher, his role later switched to that of a performer. While there was a practical aspect to this, in that his fluency in Thai could help overcome the language barrier when Japanese performers performed for Thai audiences, the team's evaluation of him went beyond that. In both the Dansai and Gotemba research, Shimoda demonstrated his ability to take action and fit in. He went to enter rivers whenever he encountered them, casually started conversations with people he met, and immersed himself in the local community. He could also encapsulate these experiences in writing. Initially, he wrote research notes shared only

within the team, but ultimately, he wrote and published "Tomo's Diary" during the performance period. In the premiere version of *Ao ni Au*, the diary written by "Ao" as a private document was also released. This time, with Tomo writing it after participating in the research months before the performance and engaging in repeated dialogues within the team, deep insights about the people of Dansai and the events occurring during the performance were woven into the diary. For the audience, this likely made Tomo a much more relatable narrator.

In this way, all team members were involved in the creation beyond their credited roles, and the work and performance format evolved by incorporating discoveries made at each point in time, which was very organic. On one hand, I felt it was a very stimulating method of creation that could be done without fixing the goal image, since it was not a performance in a designated place like a theater. On the other hand, I was also impressed by how the production team accepted and managed that variability (or opacity). To my knowledge, if this were to be realized in Japan within the conventional framework, it would likely involve considerable difficulties, but these concerns were overcome by the relationships the Prayoon Foundation had built with local residents in Dansai and the differences in regional characteristics. The differences in the performance environments between Japan and Dansai were largely something I only understood after visiting the actual location, and to be honest, I was quite perplexed during the Gotemba visit. I believe I was the only one among those accompanying the Gotemba research who did not understand these vital points.



Figure 9: A scene during the performance at the Mun River. Tomo (right) goes into water whenever he finds it.

The one-week research in Gotemba was attended by Pramsumran, Suzuki (who plays Ryu), Shimoda (who plays Tomo), and the Prayoon Foundation production team members who came to Japan. Additionally, with Ishigami joining for the last two days, it became the first and last opportunity for the entire team to gather since the start of the “Parallel Normalities” project. On that occasion, a talk event titled “Parallel Normalities – Connecting ‘Your Town’ and ‘My Town’ through Art” was held at the same venue as Suzuki’s photo exhibition, where the entire team took the stage to introduce the creative process. The venue was a corner of a café called Gotemba Apartment store, and it was so well-attended that some people were standing. The event showed the high level of interest in the work, but a question asked at the end, “Is there a way for us in Japan to watch it?” made us keenly aware once again of the sense of distance in what this international co-production project connects. Most of the talk’s attendees would not be able to go to Dansai to see the actual performance, and the people of Dansai, the primary intended audience, are not here either. The ongoing, uninterrupted continuity of everyday life in each location is a fundamental premise and theme of this project, and this performance is like a mutation within it. Overcoming the physical distance and language barrier to provide the option for the audience to vicariously experience the work no matter where they are was a significant challenge to meet.

Photo Exhibition Details:

Several Journeys Around Ao

Photos: Suzuki Ryuichiro

Schedule: Wednesday, April 19 to Sunday, April 30, 2023

Venue: Gotemba Apartment store

Talk Event Details:

Parallel Normalities – Connecting

“Your Town” and “My Town” through Art

Schedule: 3:00 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. on Saturday, April 22, 2023

Venue: Gotemba Apartment store

Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/events/936844764025194>

Video Recording: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=782059993163767



Figure 10: First in-person meeting. From left: Ishigami, TOMITA Chigusa, and Pramsumran

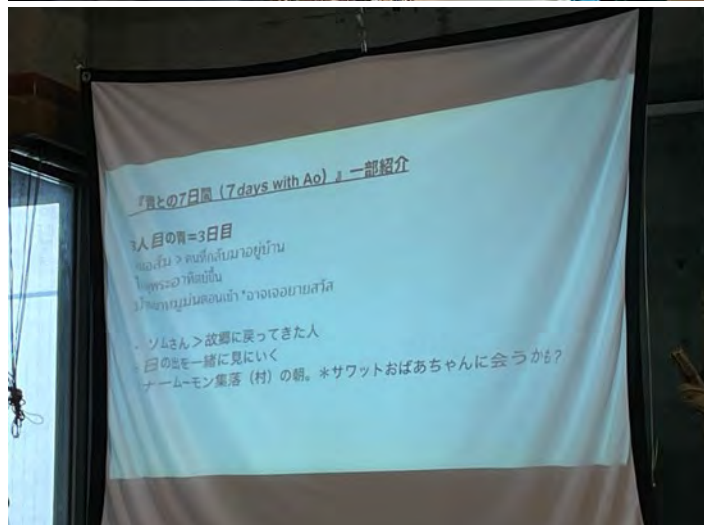


Figure 11: Talk event. The working title of the work at this time was *Seven Days with Ao*.

ISHIGAMI Natsuki & Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN (Thailand)
Parallel Normalities “Whispering Blue
– I heard your voice from the back of a blue car”
Third Report: Actual Performance and What
the Co-Production Bridged
 FUJISUE Moe

On July 16, 2023, the day before the performance, I met up with the performers SUZUKI Ryuichiro and SHIMODA Tomonori, as well as staff from the Japan Foundation, at Haneda Airport and first flew to the capital, Bangkok. We then transferred to another airport within Bangkok and took a one-hour domestic flight to Loei Airport, followed by a drive of just under an hour. It took a whole day to reach Dansai from Tokyo. At the hotel Baan Chan Phu, which served as my base during the stay, the project team from the Prayoon Foundation greeted us, and for the first time in four months since Gotemba, the performance team, excluding ISHIGAMI Natsuki, gathered in one place. Having spent time together during the Gotemba research, even though I was only an observer, I found the space created by this team to be a very comfortable place for me to participate. This may be because I stepped into a territory where “team building” had occurred, which I felt when I first met them. At the same time, I also experienced a strange feeling, wondering if these two, with whom I had traveled such a long distance and chatted casually, would really appear in front of me as performers the next day. This is because they were in Dansai as themselves in an all too ordinary way, and there was only one meeting scheduled before the performance the following day, with no rehearsals or dress rehearsals planned.

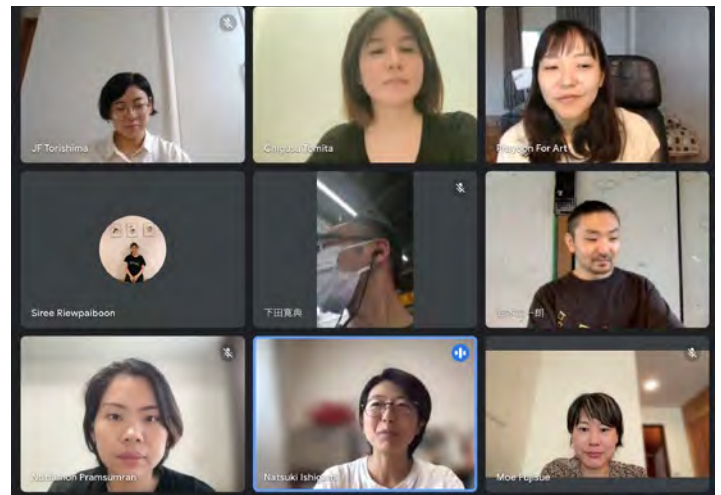
The two travelers, Ryu and Tomo, who appear in this work, are played by Suzuki Ryuichiro and Shimoda Tomonori as themselves. The characters and life backgrounds are almost identical to their own, but they become people clad in a thin veneer of fiction during the performance. This covering could be termed fiction, the very setting of the two being in Dansai, or it might be called direction. In the script, they each have their own purpose for revisiting Dansai, which is revealed to the audience as they follow their seven-day journey. The final settings communicated to the two by Nuttamon PRAMSUMRAN during an online meeting held with

the performers one week before leaving for Dansai were roughly as follows:

- Ryu is searching for someone who might be “Ao,” who he heard was in Dansai long ago, and takes photos every day.
- Tomo is searching for blue butterflies that are said to be in Dansai and writes a daily diary.
- The two had met last year in Dansai, to which they had traveled separately, and this time they reunite as acquaintances.
- This work connects to the Maizuru version of Ao ni Au, but “Ao” is not necessarily a human and exists as a broader concept.

Overall, that’s all there was to it—just this.

During the performance period, the two performers read the script released daily at the same time as the audience, learning where they will go the next day, who they will meet, and what they will do. Compared to the writers and production team, who have a grasp of the seven-day script, the performers have very little information at the beginning of the journey. On the set of this work, the production team took great care not to give away any spoilers, not only to the audience but also to the performers, and the two accepted this as they listened to the explanation.



I remembered this meeting the day I arrived in Dansai because I had ruminated on a discussion Ishigami had raised there.



Figure 1: Loei Airport. From here, it's nearly another hour by car.



Figure 2: Arrival in Dansai. On the left is Shimoda Tomonori, next to him is Suzuki Ryuichiro.

During the performance in Maizuru, there was a concern that the performers would not be able to rest due to the nonstop nature of the nonstop performance, so a rule was created to clarify the on/off time of the performers. Also, Ishigami said that having a clear presence of “Ao” as a performer created a condition where it was easy for the performers to enter into the fictional setting even amid the everyday scenery of Maizuru.

In Dansai, “Ao” in human form does not appear. Ishigami seemed to feel that the hurdle for the two performers switch between performance and non-performance had been raised this time. She wondered whether they could immerse themselves in the world of the script at the time of the performance every day, surrounded as they were by the reliable acquaintances of the creation team. Therefore, several ideas were suggested to help create Ryu and Tomo’s state of mind, such as carrying items that would make them aware of their on/off time as actors and how the staff should interact with the performers during the performance. Since the performance relies heavily on the performers’ improvisation, the focus of the discussion was on how to support their mental preparation.

When a town’s everyday scenery becomes the stage, most of it cannot be controlled. Moreover, Ishigami, who had been involved in this work almost entirely online during the COVID-19 pandemic, was passing the ball of direction, embracing that distance and frustration as a given. I think Ishigami’s comment at the end of the meeting one week prior well reflected her sense of distance: “[Regarding the performers’ on/off switch], it’s possible that the environment of Dansai will turn it on, so there are parts that I don’t know myself. Ultimately, it’s up to Poh [Pramsumran’s nickname] and the performers themselves to decide, but I’ll pass on my ideas as a sort of will.” Creation and performance premised on not being on-site was a challenge in the sense that she had to let go and entrust to others what she had been able to somehow manage flexibly as a writer being on-site. Recalling the discussion of handing over this kind of work from Maizuru to Dansai, from writer to performers, I read the script for the first day that arrived from Fah in the evening, and the long travel day came to an end.

And then the first day of the performance arrived. When I arrived at Wat Pon Chai, which was designated as the first scene, people who had also come to watch the performance were waiting for the arrival of Ryu and Tomo, wandering around the temple grounds looking somewhat bored. The

two appeared at exactly 4:00 p.m. and raised the curtain matter-of-factly (or so it seemed to me). On the contrary, it was the audience members who were nervous, straining their ears from a distance to listen in on the reunion of the two and Beer, a local performer who would become a key person in the journey, and trying to follow the story from the barely audible conversation taking place outdoors. Once inside the temple’s main hall, the tension intensified further, and while the “[rules for viewing](#)” were being followed, it became a scene where the pressure of the audience on the performers was palpable. This slightly strange atmosphere was also mentioned as performer feedback at the evening meeting.

As one of the audience members, I understand this well, but especially in the first scene, the awareness of watching a play made us feel that “we might not understand the story if we don’t follow the lines.” A change was seen in the audience around the time we moved to Hong Cha café. Due to the structure of the café space, it became difficult for everyone to approach and listen to the conversation all at once, and the audience began to order drinks and act more freely. In my experience, I gradually realized that it is neither possible nor that important to catch and follow all the lines in this drama production. The most important parts of the story have already been revealed in the script, and they can be supplemented the next day with Ryu’s photos and Tomo’s diary. Rather than being too nervous, I decided to prioritize immersing myself in the same atmosphere as the two travelers and keep in mind the beautiful moments and striking words captured by my own eyes and ears. Through the viewing experience on the first day, this is the mindset I developed as an audience member visiting Dansai for the first time.

As for the local audience, I thought they were much more relaxed in welcoming the two travelers than I was. The official Whispering Blue LINE account that delivered Fah’s messages had about 170 registered users who followed the performance together. These 170 people did not come to the performance site every day, but they accompanied the journey of the two while gathering what was happening that day from the script, each within the pace of their own lives. Several of them replied to Fah’s messages with their impressions of the viewing experience and photos taken during the performance, creating two-way communication. Choosing LINE, a tool commonly used in Thailand, lowered the hurdle for communication, allowing for a view of the audience that could not be seen only at the performance sites.



Figure 3: Meeting held the day before the performance



Figure 4: Accommodation for the performers. To separate the living spaces, a residence was prepared for the performers, separate from the staff hotel.



Figure 5: Appearance scene at Wat Pon Chai. Script for the first day: <https://whisperingblue.wixsite.com/whisperingblue/en/17th-july>



Figure 6: A scene at Hong Cha café. A man wearing a Phi Ta Khon mask appeared across from the café.



Figure 7: Viewing the play at Hong Cha café. The performance is taking place on the terrace in the back.

One audience member who met Ryu and Tomo three times during the performance period sent a message claiming to have received too few products when making a purchase during a scene where Tomo and the others were helping with local performer Doi's soymilk stand. This was just a small complaint in everyday life, but in this instance, it was also an impression of the viewing experience. The sender of the message was not angry at all, and spotting Tomo the next day, called out to him, told him about the incident, and chatted for a while, later conveying through LINE the happiness at meeting the two travelers.

Many local performers participated in this work and were also the closest audience to the performance group outside of their dramatic appearances. They had already met Suzuki and Shimoda during the Dansai research and had built relationships of trust by keeping in touch even outside the performance period, especially with Siree RIEWPAIBOON of the Prayoon Foundation. Appearing as themselves, they were told nothing more than the script, and it was shared that people would come to watch at the times specified in the script. When I asked Doi, one of the performers, he said that he was initially nervous during his scene, but the nervousness eased while talking with Ryu and Tomo, and he could enjoy a normal conversation.

The presence of the audience may have made them a little anxious. Still, all the local performers enjoyed the stage (which, for them, was the setting of their daily life) with a relaxed, open attitude, and occasionally surprised the audience and the performance group with spontaneous behaviors not in the script. On the first day of the performance, someone appeared wearing a Phi Ta Khon mask across from the café, and on the third day,



Figure 8: LINE messages received from Fah



Figure 9: Beer is in the middle of the three. Pus, who is also a photographer, is taking photos with his own camera.



Figure 10: Beer's blue car



Figure 11: The two helping at Doi's soy milk stand



Figure 12: Doi appeared in festival attire. He took off the Phi Ta Khon mask and handed it to Tomo.



Figure 13: Pus, the café owner, is on the far left.



Figure 14: The newly opened café "The Enlighten Coffee and Community"

lives in urban areas. The scene that left the biggest impression on me was on the evening of the third day when such "normalities" of Dansai unfolded.

They left the field for Baan Chan Phu to pick up Som, who works for a hospital as a clinical psychologist.

They arrive at Baan Chan Phu at 18:00. Som and three of them have a plan to see the sunset at a viewpoint together. Preaw may also joins them. She graduated from a high school in Dansai and is now studying in a college in Northern Thailand. She is back in town during summer holiday and happened to be at Baan Chan Phu. As Ryu and Tomo also left their hometowns and once lived in Tokyo, they understand both the feeling of leaving a hometown for new things and longing for home.

(From [the script for Day 3, July 19](#))

Som and Beer once left Dansai and came back. Ryu used to work in Tokyo but returned to his hometown last year. Preaw has just returned home for an internship but she wants to study in China after graduation. So she won't be back in Dansai for a while. As for me, I am still in Tokyo, having left my parents' home 15 years ago and moved to Tokyo, and to be honest, I can't imagine returning to my parents' home.

(From [Tomo's diary on Day 3, July 19](#))

As night fell, it was a truly beautiful scene where the lives of people living in their respective places in Thailand and Japan overlapped for a moment on a hill overlooking the town of Dansai, surrounded by mountains.

At an online meeting held a month before the performance, as feedback on Pramsumran's script draft, Ishigami conveyed that "things that wouldn't normally happen had not yet occurred." I understood this to mean that this drama can get into and link various phenomena that exist independently of each other in the town or around the world

and present them before the audience's eyes as if by a miracle and that she wanted them to be presented. What appears there, Ishigami called the "unexpected" lurking in everyday life, while Pramsumran called it a "miracle," but it seems that it was not easy to reconcile these interpretations. For example, in response to the comment above, Pramsumran's initial reaction was, "Isn't it already a miracle that Tomo and Ryu are in Dansai?" Hearing this discussion for the first time, that also sounded to me like a correct interpretation from a high-angle point of view. What is clear is that the two writers' stances (one could also say their sense of distance from the work) seemed to be quite different. Despite the differences in their stances as writers, this scene on the hill came to life a month later. Realized based on discussions in Japanese, Thai, and English, and after Pramsumran spent time digesting it and facing the writing, this scene was an endpoint in this work adapted through co-production and handed over to Dansai.

After the performance, producer TOMITA Chigusa reflected on this international co-production during the COVID-19 pandemic. She said that although being unable to meet in person and lacking many things was challenging, perhaps the efforts to fill these distances and lacks allowed them to cultivate novelty in the production. It's a comment that conveys the feeling of the management team, who not only connected the two writers over the course of three years but also created and mediated multiple paths for the audience to access the work.

When I asked Ishigami about it, she said that in the collaborative structure where one was taking on the challenge for the first time and the other was the original author with presentation experience, not being able to meet actually brought an appropriate sense of distance to the two in a situation where the difficulty lay heavier on Pramsumran. The concern about friction arising from two different playwrights co-creating one work also seems to have been dispelled by that sense of distance.

Also, in an interview after the performance, Pramsumran said that in this co-production, she was able to learn and experiment with many things that were not part of her creative methods before, such as writing in an improvisational way, having the performers improvise, and putting on a play with a script that only specifies the settings and framework

without specifying the lines. On the other hand, she also confided that she was initially skeptical about the structure of this work, where “the script can be read in advance.” She didn’t seem to find it realistic that the audience, knowing the performance content beforehand, would come to the performance locations. However, as the creation progressed, she rethought that there is indeed meaning in coming to those places, because the script has a vast amount of space between the lines.

Travel restrictions, distance between writers, mediation between the work and the audience, the space between the lines of the script. In

both the three-year “Parallel Normalities” project and its culmination, *Whispering Blue*, there was always some kind of “in-between” lying in front of the creation team. By not only overcoming it as a gap but also accepting it as a necessary distance at times, they were able to create a work and accomplish a performance even under the difficult circumstances of an international co-production hit directly by the COVID-19 pandemic. This experience likely holds valuable lessons for international co-productions in the post-COVID era.



Figure 15:
From left, Beer, Som, Preaw,
and Tomo
(Photo: Suzuki Ryuichiro)



Figure 16:
A rainbow appeared over Huai Sok
Reservoir. Apparently, a rainbow
also appeared over the mountains
during the performance of *Ao ni Au*
in Maizuru.

“Juggle & Hide (Seven Whatchamacallits in Search of a Director)”

**ARAKI Masamitsu, TSUKAHARA Yuya &
Wichaya ARTAMAT (Thailand)**

This stage project is a co-production by Thailand-based director Wichaya ARTAMAT, who belongs to the theatrical company “For What Theatre,” with ARAKI Masamitsu as sound designer, and TSUKAHARA Yuya, Co-director of Kyoto Experiment, as dramaturge.

Artamat’s previous works have examined the relationship between politics, an individual’s upbringing, and artistic expression. He makes heavy use of props as metaphors for various incidents and people while referencing events in the political history of Thailand, reflecting a creative environment in which freedom of expression is far from guaranteed. In this work, there are no actors. Instead, the props serve as characters, and the story is one in which they rebel against the authoritarian ruler of the stage work, the director—in the case of this work, Artamat himself.

His playful yet subversive approach to directing suggests ways of asking questions in order to overcome harsh and unreasonable situations, not only in regard to the Thai government, but also any individual or wider society that is unwittingly subsumed by larger authoritarian structures.

Outline of Performances

Schedule: 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, September 30, and
1:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, October 1, 2023

Duration: 70 min.

Venue: Auditorium, KYOTO ART CENTER

Credits

Concept and Direction: Wichaya ARTAMAT

Text: Pathipon ADSAVAMAHAMPONG, Wichaya Artamat

Art and Technical Direction: Pornpan ARAYAVEERASID, Rueangrith SUNTISUK

Dramaturgy: TSUKAHARA Yuya

Sound Design and Operation: ARAKI Masamitsu

Mechanics Creation: Laphonphat DUONGPLOY

Technical Operation: Piti BOONSOM, Monthira JAMSRI

Object Operation: Surat KAEWSEEKARM

Stage Management: Pathipon ADSAVAMAHAPONG

English Translation: Carina CHOTIRAWI, soi squad

Japanese surtitles: FUKUTOMI Sho

Project Management: Thongchai PIMAPUNSRI

Producer: Sasapin SIRIWANIJ

In co-operation with Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (BACC)

Residency support: KYOTO ART CENTER

Organized by: Kyoto Experiment

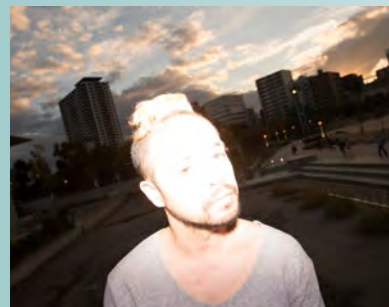
Co-Organized by: The Japan Foundation

Co-Produced by: Kyoto Experiment, The Japan Foundation and For What Theatre

Supported by The Saison Foundation (International Project Support Program Kyoto Experiment × For What Theatre *Juggle & Hide [Seven Whatchamacallits in Search of a Director]*)



ARAKI Masamitsu ©Kai Maetani



TSUKAHARA Yuya (Photo by SHIGA Lieko)



Wichaya ARTAMAT (Photo by Bea BORGERS)



Photo by NAKATANI Toshiaki (Courtesy of Kyoto Experiment)

ARAKI Masamitsu, TSUKAHARA Yuya &
Wichaya ARTAMAT (Thailand)

“Juggle & Hide (Seven Whatchamacallits in Search of a Director)”

First Report: Background of the Work / Creation in Bangkok

YAMAZAKI Kenta

Context

The creation of *Juggle & Hide (Seven Whatchamacallits in Search of a Director)* (hereinafter *J&H*) began when Wichaya ARTAMAT, who had been commissioned by Kyoto Experiment (hereinafter KEX) to create a new work, decided to realize an idea he had been contemplating for some time: “a work in which the objects that have been used as metaphors in Director Artamat’s previous works rebel against him.”

Prior to this new work, KEX had invited Artamat’s representative work, *This Song Father Used to Sing (Three Days in May)*, in March 2021 (the performance was switched from a live staging to online streaming due to the COVID-19 pandemic). From the beginning, KEX had wanted to introduce Artamat, who was attracting attention as a young Thai director, to Japanese audiences along with his representative work, and then, as the next step, commission a new work from him.

However, the first point of contact for the creative team behind the current work goes back even further. Artamat had participated as an assistant director in *Pratthana – A Portrait of Possession*, a stage adaptation of a novel by Thai author Uthis HAEMAMOOL, with a script and direction by OKADA Toshiki, and scenography and choreography by TSUKAHARA Yuya. The play premiered in Bangkok in 2018 (organized by the Japan Foundation Asia Center, precog Co., Ltd., and chelfitsch). Other members of the *Pratthana* team also participated in the current creation: Sasapin SIRIWANIJ as producer, Thongchai PIMAPUNSRI as project manager, Pornpan ARAYAVEERASID for art and technical direction, ARAKI Masamitsu for sound design and operation, and Tsukahara as dramaturge. Although not listed as a creative team member this time, KAWASAKI Yoko, Co-director of KEX, had also participated in *Pratthana*

as a production manager. In terms of international co-production, the fact that the creation of *J&H* could begin out of the experience accumulated in *Pratthana* is surely of great significance.

Background (1): About Wichaya Artamat

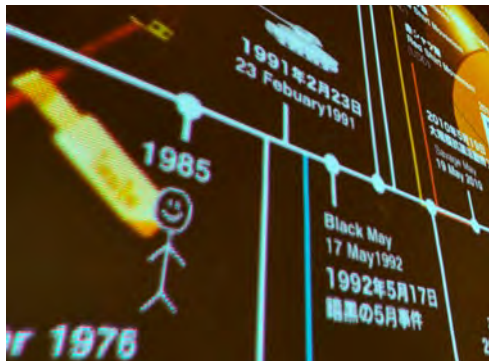
J&H is a piece that takes Artamat’s critical examination of his past activities and works as its starting point. So, what kind of works has Artamat created so far?

In Thailand, Artamat is highly regarded as an artist with an experimental style that does not adhere to the standard form of “theater.” Rather than writing his own scripts, he often hands over concepts and settings to other artists and actors and then completes the work from what emerges. Even *This Song Father Used to Sing (Three Days in May)* initially involved the actors performing improvisationally based on nothing more than a broad setting and endpoint as a framework. However, for its international tour, Artamat restructured the performance into a fixed script to accommodate subtitles. Apart from a series of works inspired by dates that have important political meaning in Thailand, as exemplified by *This Song Father Used to Sing (Three Days in May)*, Artamat has also worked on documentary theater that focuses on the “performativity” of the performers, such as *In Ther’s View: a Documentary Theatre*, which is based on interviews with several actresses active in Bangkok.

Background (2): Changes in Thai Society

Behind Artamat’s decision to take a critical look at his own activities and works as an artist and create a new work from that reflection are the changes in Thai society in recent years. In Thailand, where there is a law against lèse-majesté, political messages may be subject to censorship or punishment, and thus great care must be taken in handling them. Therefore, for artists of the generation before Artamat, metaphor was a widely adopted technique to get around expressing political messages directly and avoid censorship. However, the social atmosphere appears to be shifting. For example, in Thailand, the national anthem is played in public places at 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m., and one must stand still until it ends or risk charges of lèse-majesté. But in recent years, the number of people in Bangkok who do not adhere to this practice has reportedly increased. Amid concerns about the younger generation’s alienation from





the monarchy, a massive anti-government rally was held in September 2020 in front of the Royal Palace and at Thammasat University across the street, where students presented a 10-point proposal for royal reform that shocked society. Such public criticism of the monarchy was unprecedented. If political messages can be expressed directly, what is the point of deliberately converting them into metaphors to create works of art? This event forced artists of the generation before Artamat to reevaluate the role of art.

Creation at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (Up to the Second Week)

The creation process took place over three weeks from Monday, August 21 to Sunday, September 10, 2023, at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (hereafter BACC). Araki participated for the entire schedule, while Tsukahara and I, the observer, participated only in the second week. Prior to this, a residency was held at KYOTO ART CENTER in June 2022. According to the transcript of a talk held at that time¹, the script was already almost complete at that point. However, it subsequently underwent revisions, including a major rewrite, and the version used in the creation process at BACC was the third draft. The script writing was mainly handled by Pathipon ADSAVAMAHAMPONG, who has collaborated with Artamat on various works in the past, including serving as the stage manager for the overseas tour version of *This Song Father Used to Sing (Three Days in May)*. She worked on the writing and revisions in consultation with Artamat. In addition, through multiple online meetings with all the creative team members, opinions were exchanged on the script, progress was shared with the Thai team, which was considering how to design the stage, and preliminary adjustments were made for the creation process at BACC. The creation process at BACC was roughly divided into the first week for the first part of the script, “Juggle,” the second week for the second part, “& Hide,” and the third week for overall brush-up. On each Saturday, a process-sharing session was held for the audience, and on the final day, September 10 (Sunday), a full run-through was held for those involved.

The main characters of *J&H* are objects, and there are no actors or performers, in the usual sense, on stage. Most of the creation time was spent considering the order, placement, and behavior of the objects, going through a process of trial and error, and having DuckUnit, who oversaw the art direction and technical direction for this work, add new devices and gimmicks as needed. The “objects” mentioned here also include audio equipment such as speakers, which Araki is in charge of. By the time of the run-through at the end of the second week, the work had, for the present, taken shape through to the end, but it gave the impression

that further brush-up was needed to make the audience fully appreciate the concept of “a rebellion of the objects.”

Tsukahara, the dramaturge, repeatedly pointed out the need to consider how to convey the work to an audience that does not fully understand the Thai context. The work has a large amount of information (information unfamiliar to Japanese audiences), including the political timeline of Thailand, Artamat’s personal timeline, and explanations of Artamat’s past works mentioned in the story. Moreover, during the performance, objects are placed on the stage one after another, and at the same time, footage of this process filmed by multiple cameras, footage of past works, and related photographs are rapidly projected on two screens placed at the back and stage right. There is no doubt that the appeal of this work lies in the blending of all these elements, but depending on the placement of the subtitles, for example, the audience’s attention may be drawn either to the events on stage or to footage on the screens. In any case, since on-site adjustments are essential for the subtitles, the final adjustments to the “visibility” were postponed until the creation process in Kyoto just before the performance.

¹ [Report] Wichaya Artamat Talk Event
https://kyoto-ex.jp/magazine/2022_wichaya_artamat_talk/



ARAKI Masamitsu, TSUKAHARA Yuya &
Wichaya ARTAMAT (Thailand)

“Juggle & Hide (Seven Whatchamacallits in Search of a Director)”

Second Report: Co-creation Process: ARAKI Masamitsu (Sound Design / Audio Operation)

YAMAZAKI Kenta

Co-creation Process: ARAKI Masamitsu (Sound Design / Audio Operation)

Here, we will look at how Araki Masamitsu, responsible for sound design and audio operation, carried out the co-creation process of *J&H* with Wichaya ARTAMAT and the rest of the Thai creative team. The following overview is a compilation of insights gained by the observer on-site, interviews with Araki, and statements made during the talk at the Kyoto performance.

Preparation for Creation

In forming the creative team and concretely advancing the production, it was decided early on that the DuckUnit team would be in charge of the “objects” (props and their gimmicks) that form the core of *J&H* as well as video and lighting. However, since DuckUnit did not have sound specialists, it became apparent that an artist responsible for the sound aspect was necessary to bring the work to life. Thus, Araki’s name came up, as he had become an acquaintance of Artamat and others through *Pratthana* and had deepened his interaction with Artamat by visiting his studio when Artamat stayed in Kyoto in 2022. Araki, who participates in the works of various artists as a sound staff member while continuing to present his own works focused on sound as an artist himself, could be described as the perfect fit as a creative partner to build a work while sharing ideas.

During the period leading up to the creation in Bangkok in August 2023, they held online meetings repeatedly to share the concept, script, basic structure of the stage, and gadgets prepared for the production.

Araki proceeded with preparations for the creation in Bangkok while confirming the equipment available at BACC and what he would need to bring from Japan. Although the script was completed in advance, the nature of this work, where the main components are the objects on stage, their movements, and video footage of them, meant that there were overwhelmingly more things that could not be understood without actually moving the objects on-site.

Digesting the Concept

According to Araki, the first week of creation at BACC (Monday, August 21 to Sunday, August 27) was spent digesting the concept. How will the concept, written into the script or shared verbally, be realized on stage? What can Araki himself contribute? In the production of *J&H*, the creation process was carried out not in a top-down manner with director Artamat at the top, but in an equal relationship where each section came up with ideas and tried them out on-site first, followed by an exchange of opinions. This approach was also applied to Araki’s participation, and he was apparently given complete freedom from the start regarding what kind of ideas he would bring.

At the start of the creation at BACC, one sound material that it was already decided would be used was the audio from Artamat’s lecture “A Practice on a Timeline” held in Bangkok in January 2023. This serves as the base for the first part, “Juggle.” In addition, the video footage of Artamat’s past works and related news footage projected on the screen at the back of the stage as the work progressed also include audio. Although DuckUnit is directly in charge of the video aspect, how should those audio components be handled? Also, in the second part, where the objects rebel against director Artamat, the tentative plan was to use something like noise music. This idea works as a concept in that the din the objects make becomes literal noise. But is simply creating and playing noise music the best thing for this work?

Planning and Implementation (1): Original Audio Equipment

Araki coordinated with Artamat and others on how the materials already decided to be used within the work would be integrated (whether they want the materials to be heard as live voices or as past recordings, whether they want them to be heard clearly or if they must flow as sound, etc.) and



devised an appropriate sound plan. He also proposed several new plans.

The first was to install original audio equipment on stage. The main characters of *J&H* are objects, and even the cameras filming the video footage projected on the screen at the back of the stage are set up visibly on stage for the audience to see. Araki suggested that if that's the case, the sound should also be a concrete presence on stage rather than an abstract thing heard from somewhere off-stage. Initially, it was already planned to set up some speakers on stage in a visible manner. However, in addition to that, Araki decided to make a new audio device using cassette tapes with the help of DuckUnit.

The fact that the idea of creating an audio device on the spot based on ideas that came up at the creation site was realized is thanks to the presence of DuckUnit, who have the skills to make things, and Araki's efforts to make the most of the broader possibilities available by having DuckUnit on the team. Although it may be difficult to discern from the output of the work, from the perspective of co-production, the fact that such cross-sectional co-creation took place in the creative process could be evidence that sufficient exchanges of opinions and resulting emergence among artists were taking place. It should also be noted that the idea of using cassette tapes is particularly brilliant, as the physical tapes, which record audio—representing the past—in linear form, echo and visualize in the sound aspect the concept of overlapping Thai political history with Artamat's personal history (a "timeline") and visualizing this on stage through the railroad tracks (line).

The audio equipment using cassette tapes was printed on-site with a 3D printer. A prototype was completed in the second week of creation at BACC, and after improvements and adjustments, multiple units were eventually produced and used in the final stage performance.

Planning and Implementation (2):

Sound that Disrupts the Sense of Distance

Araki's second proposal concerned the handling of sound during the objects' rebellion in the second part. Instead of using mere noise, he chose to create a mechanism that amplifies/emphasizes/disrupts the presence of the objects by using the sounds made when the objects move (through DuckUnit's gimmicks) on stage, along with multiple microphones and speakers set up on stage. In this work, where objects are the main characters, cameras and video footage juxtapose the past

and present, and the presence of small objects is amplified/emphasized by being shown in close-ups. This means that the objects are presented to the audience at various *distances*. The disruption of distance is closely tied to the concept of the objects' rebellion. Audio equipment is also a means to disrupt the sense of distance effectively.

The sound design for disrupting distance was further developed during the six-day creation in Kyoto (Sunday, September 24 to Friday, September 29) just before the actual performances (Saturday, September 30 and Sunday, October 1). Solenoids, devices that convert electrical signals into motion, were set up in blind spots on the stage, and the rattling sound they made was added to the sound design. Along with the actual sounds made by the objects on stage and those sounds amplified by the audio equipment, the addition of sounds not made by the objects themselves but that are emitted from the stage and perceived by the audience as the presence of writhing objects made the objects' rebellion feel more *vivid*. The solenoids, placed even behind the screens, gave the projected objects a tactile presence, acoustically suggesting that they were physically there. Thus, they disrupted the audience's perception and the order imposed on the objects.

In a talk after the performance on Sunday, October 1, Araki made a statement to the effect of "Since this work is not centered on performers, I approached the creation with the idea of making the most of the characters/properties and language of the objects on stage, the video footage, the sounds, and the lecture audio." The process of realizing this has been described up to this point. Still, it should be reiterated that Araki was able to fully demonstrate his creativity in this way because the creation of *J&H* was a co-production process in which the team members brought together their maximum creativity.



ARAKI Masamitsu, TSUKAHARA Yuya &
Wichaya ARTAMAT (Thailand)

“Juggle & Hide (Seven Whatchamacallits in Search of a Director)”

Third Report: Co-creation Process: TSUKAHARA Yuya (Dramaturge) / Performances and Their Reception YAMAZAKI Kenta

Co-creation Process: TSUKAHARA Yuya (Dramaturge)

What role did Tsukahara Yuya, who participated in the creation of *J&H* as a dramaturge, play in the co-production process? Essentially, his role was to consider how to present this work, which is strongly tied to Thai political history, to Japanese audiences (i.e., those with little knowledge of Thai political history) while respecting the concept of the work and judge to what extent it will be conveyed to Japanese audiences and to what extent it is acceptable for it not to be conveyed.

Dramaturge and Festival Director

Tsukahara's role as a dramaturge in *J&H* can be easily understood when viewed in continuity with his role as Co-director of KEX, which served as the venue for the premiere of *J&H* and co-produced the work together with the Japan Foundation and For What Theatre.

Here, I would like to refer to the role of the dramaturge in Germany.¹ In Germany, where many dramaturges work as employees of theaters and festivals, dramaturges are said to be responsible for three types of dramaturgy: repertoire dramaturgy, which involves the selection of works for the theater; production dramaturgy, which involves the creation of individual works; and audience dramaturgy, which connects the activities of the theater with the audience and the general public (but not as publicity or advertising). Usually, they are responsible for all of these rather than focusing on just one. By contrast, in Japan, dramaturges are often involved in creation on a per-work basis, primarily concentrating on what is referred to here as production dramaturgy.

Tsukahara's role in *J&H* is also primarily related to production dramaturgy in the sense that he attended the creation process and exchanged opinions with the members to help realize the work in the best possible form. However, considering that a large part of his efforts was based on the perspective of how Japanese audiences would receive *J&H* as a work, it is also clear that his role was inseparable from audience dramaturgy. How the audience receives a performed work depends greatly on the context in which it is placed, and designing that context is critical when considering audience dramaturgy. Indeed, the question of how and to what extent information about Thai politics and history, which form the background of the work, should be shared with the audience was on the table for discussion from the online meeting stage.

In addition, the fact that KEX had invited Wichaya ARTAMAT's representative work *This Song Father Used to Sing (Three Days in May)* in March 2021, prior to *J&H*, can also be regarded as part of the context design in the festival. As already mentioned, the invitation of *This Song Father Used to Sing* was planned from the beginning with a view to commissioning a new work. Considering that *J&H*, which became the commissioned new work, was based on Artamat's past works, the fact that his representative work *This Song Father Used to Sing* had already been introduced to Japanese audiences became of greater significance. While the programming of KEX as a festival is beyond the scope of duties of the dramaturge for *J&H*, programming from the perspective of how to connect the work and the audience is related to the festival's repertoire dramaturgy and audience dramaturgy. It is quite natural that Tsukahara, who has overseen these dramaturgies as Co-director of KEX, would also be in charge of dramaturgy in creating the work *J&H*.

Designing and Presenting the Context

Designing the context outside of the work itself is basically within the scope of Tsukahara's work as a Co-director rather than as a dramaturge. Still, as described so far, the continuity of the two roles is evident. Here, I would like to provide an overview of what kind of context was prepared and how background information was provided for the performance of *J&H* in Japan.

To review in chronological order, as already mentioned, the first step was inviting Artamat's representative work, *This Song Father Used to Sing*, to be part of the KEX 2021 SPRING program in March 2021. Along



with this, a column by FUKUTOMI Sho (researcher of Thai literature and Thai-Japanese translator and interpreter), who also created the subtitles for *J&H*, was published in KEX's web magazine, providing background information on the work and the social situation in Thailand. In addition, *This Song Father Used to Sing* was designated as a subject work for the "Performing Arts Criticism Project 2021 Spring" implemented as part of KEX's program. Three reviews selected from the submitted entries were published in the web magazine. This was the context before *J&H*.

In June 2022, a residency and talk session were held at KYOTO ART CENTER in preparation for *J&H*. On September 14, 2023, a transcript of the talk from that time was published as an article in the web magazine,² and on the 29th, the day before the premiere of *J&H*, an article was also published giving an overview of Thai political history from the Siamese Revolution in 1932 to the present in 2023.³ The same article was also included in the program distributed to the audience at the performance of *J&H*.

The process of building a long-term and continuous relationship with the artist, from the invitation of a representative work to a residency and talk session for a new work and then the performance of the new work, parallels the process of building a long-term and continuous relationship between the festival and its audience. Even audience members who have not followed the process in real time could supplement the context through articles published on the web corresponding to each stage. It is quite rare and comprehensive to have six articles available on the web to learn about the context of a single work, even more so if they are all compiled in a web magazine format.

In international co-productions, the emergence among artists in the creation process and the quality of the work itself are often emphasized, but in many cases, not enough context behind the creation is presented to the audience (the same can be said for works invited from abroad). However, as long as the performing arts are premised on the existence of an audience, it should be essential to present the context of the artists and the work to the audience to a certain extent when staging a performance.

In this respect, KEX's approach of carefully designing and presenting the context by building long-term and continuous relationships and archiving related articles should be highly appreciated as another achievement of international co-production, or as an ideal form of it.

Subtitles and Videos

Next, let's look at some specific points that Tsukahara considered and judgments that he made as a dramaturge in the creation of *J&H* itself in order to deliver this work, which is strongly tied to Thai political history, to Japanese audiences.

First, we will look at the placement of the subtitles. Initially, the subtitles for Artamat's lecture audio were projected at the top of the screen, but this meant that audience members who do not understand Thai must keep looking at the top of the screen. In a work with human performers, their movements might somehow enter the audience's field of vision, but in this work, where the arrangement and movement of objects placed on a table is central, much of the visual information is concentrated at a lower level. This would make it difficult to simultaneously keep both the subtitles at the top of the screen and the objects on the table in one's field of vision. So, an alternative of displaying subtitles in the center of the screen was also tried, but this made the subtitles too prominent and risked hindering the concept of the work, which centers on the objects. In the end, it was decided to return the subtitles to the top and adjust their position and size to make them as easy to read as possible. This decision included the judgment that the audience does not necessarily have to follow all the information shown in the subtitles to understand the concept of the work.

During the creation process in Kyoto, just before the actual performances, it was further judged that the subtitles, as originally planned, would change too quickly and be difficult to read completely. With the permission of the translator, Fukutomi, the three Co-directors of KEX (KAWASAKI Yoko, Juliet Reiko KNAPP, and Tsukahara) collaborated to shorten the subtitles as much as possible.

On the other hand, the subtitles to the videos of Artamat's past works, which were also projected on the screen, were ultimately removed. This was because the burden of constantly reading subtitles would be too great for the audience, and focusing on the subtitles would make it difficult for the audience to notice the connections and similarities between the visual information in the videos, which has great significance for *J&H* as a work, and the objects on stage. The fact that the video clips were edited as fragments in the first place also meant that the content of the past works could not be understood even with subtitles.

In terms of visual information, the content of the videos projected on



the screen also underwent major changes during the creation process in Kyoto. At the run-through held at the end of the creation in Bangkok, the screens almost always showed footage from multiple cameras on stage, footage of Artamat's past works, and various related images and videos, all projected simultaneously. The appeal of this version lay in how multiple images correlated with each other to create new images, but for Japanese audiences who do not fully understand the Thai context, such a flood of information was too overwhelming to grasp the meaning and risked overlooking the presence of essential objects such as clocks and picture frames that become focal points in the latter half of the work. (This point, as well as several other points regarding subtitles and video footage in the Kyoto creation process, were made not by Tsukahara alone but through discussion among the three Co-directors, here too revealing the continuity between the roles of Co-director and dramaturge.) In the end, the visual information was organized to clearly show each important object on stage one by one in the videos, resulting in much simpler video footage than the version in Bangkok.

Creation in Kyoto and Reactions to the Performances

The creation process in Kyoto progressed in a state where it was unclear what the work's final form would be until the actual performances, even though the work had more or less been completed by the end of the creation process in Bangkok. This was because there were many issues to address in almost all sections, including the originally planned tasks, such as checking whether the equipment used in Thailand could also be used in Japan, adjusting the lighting to accommodate changes in the overall appearance due to differences in projector performance and floor color, and installing and adjusting the solenoids added by ARAKI Masamitsu. There were also last-minute changes to the subtitles and video footage and an accompanying review of their operation, which were decided on after arriving in Kyoto. Frankly, from an outsider's perspective, it seemed dangerously close to not being ready in time. But thanks to the astonishing persistence of the creation team in the final stages, the performances opened without any problems.

However, small changes and adjustments continued over the two days and three performances. Although the behavior of the countless objects on stage was set up in advance, they were designed to create a chaotic and unpredictable situation that was impossible to control as a whole, as

they interfered with each other. Therefore, even if there were no particular problems, it must have been essential to fine-tune them, presenting different aspects with each performance while observing the audience's reactions to achieve better performances.

Although the three performances did not sell out, most of the prepared seats were filled, so it can be said that *J&H* achieved a fair degree of success in attracting an audience. The audience in Kyoto was generally enveloped in quiet concentration. This contrasts with the reaction at the run-through for those involved in Bangkok, where there was a lot of laughter from the audience. However, this is unavoidable given that the Japanese audience did not understand the background of the work as much as the Thai audience. Many attendees seemed focused on absorbing and processing the vast amount of information presented on stage.

Particularly noteworthy was the high level of audience interest seen in the two post-show talks. Due to the nature of the work, the talks were held in a separate room after the performance, but nearly all of the about 50 chairs provided were filled, and there were even people standing. This great turnout suggests that many audience members wanted to learn more about the work's background. Furthermore, during the Q&A, one audience member raised a particularly critical question about the work, asking, "If the objects' rebellion against the director is itself the director's intention, aren't the objects ultimately still controlled by the director?" Regarding this point, art and performing arts critic TAKASHIMA Megumu acknowledged this charade-like nature of *J&H* but also touched on the fact that time was set aside after the performance so that the audience could freely view the objects on stage. She stated, "The attitude of ensuring time and a relationship in which 'the audience takes a step toward the performers (objects) on stage' conveyed a desire to eliminate boundaries and divisions."⁴ This shows that the work not only aroused interest in its background but also stimulated the audience's thinking with its core concept. The very fact that such a question was posed may be an answer to whether this work reached the Japanese audience.

After the Co-Production

After the performances, producer Sasapin SIRIWANIJ responded to an email interview by the observer asking about the co-production's results, saying, "I think the ambitious and highly uncertain project came to fruition



as a wonderful achievement thanks to the tolerance of our partner, KEX.” At the same time, she added, “How to present the completed work to various audiences is an issue that we should continue to consider.”

On the other hand, Tsukahara stated, “First of all, it was great that Artamat took on the challenge of a new format,” and highlighted the DuckUnit team’s outstanding contribution to the work as an outcome that he had not anticipated before the creation began. It is also important to point out that Araki’s participation eliminated any overt *Thai exoticism* from the sound aspect, resulting in a work with outstanding universality. This is likely also the result of Araki maintaining the perspective of the Japanese audience throughout the creation.

Reflecting on finishing his work in line with the piece as the person in charge of the sound aspect, Araki mentioned that the creation process this time led him to reconsider the interplay between daily life and artistic activities. Tsukahara concluded his response to my email interview by commenting that he is looking forward to seeing what kind of reactions this performance of *J&H* will elicit from Japan in the future. This could be a hope that the performance of a work by artists from Thailand, a country where life, politics, and art are interrelated in a different way than in Japan, focusing on those very relationships, will prompt a rethink of the relationship between life, politics, and art in Japan.

¹ For more about dramaturge in Germany, refer to HIRATA Eiichiro’s *The Dramaturg, toward promoting the theatre arts* (Sangensha-Publisher, 2010).

² Report: Wichaya Artamat Talk Event
https://kyoto-ex.jp/magazine/2022_wichaya_artamat_talk/

³ Overview of Thai Political History for *Juggle & Hide* (*Seven Whatchamacallits in Search of a Director*)
https://kyoto-ex.jp/magazine/juggle_hide/

⁴ “artscape” web magazine, November 15, 2023 issue
https://artscape.jp/report/review/10188481_1735.html
 Note that the October 15, 2023, issue of the “artscape” web magazine also includes a review by the reporter (YAMAZAKI).
https://artscape.jp/report/review/10187960_1735.html

“Asian Object Theater: Laos-Japan Collaboration among Deaf and Hearing Performers”

SHIRAGA Momoko & Lattanakone INSISIENGMAY (Laos)

Khao Niew (Laos), a theater company with collaboration between deaf and hearing performers, and Deaf Puppet Theater Hitomi (Japan) were joined by SHIRAGA Momoko (leader of Momonga Complex), a choreographer and director who creates new spaces through flexible ideas and configuration, in this international coproduction aimed at new creation through puppets, objects, and human bodies. Shiraga joined the two theater companies, which have been cultivating exchanges since 2018, for the first time in 2023. The work-in-progress performance held in Tokyo followed five days of research in Laos and thirteen days of joint workshops in Japan.

The project started from contact with local life, culture, and spirituality in Laos. In Japan, the two groups constructed puppets (objects) using materials and tools that they had respectively gathered or created them by perceiving the materials themselves as living things. The performance was an experimental one that explored the relationships between objects, spaces, and human bodies while preserving the differences between the Japanese and Laotian creative approaches.

Outline of Performances

Schedule: 2:00 p.m. on Sunday, November 26, 2023

Duration: 65 min.

Venue: Session House

Credits

Directors: SHIRAGA Momoko (Momonga Complex) and Lattanakone INSISIENGMAY (Khao Niew)

Cast: Lattanakone INSISIENGMAY, Khamneesone LIYANG, Chongyee GNOUTTITHAM, and Ketsana INSISIENGMAY (Khao Niew)

ENOMOTO Toru, YANASE Keiko, SUZUKI Aya, and ADACHI Saki (Deaf Puppet Theater Hitomi)

Dakei

Lighting: ITO Hiroyuki

Sound: TOMIYAMA Masayuki

Assistant Director: KITAGAWA Yu (Momonga Complex)

Stage Manager: AOKI Takashi

Interpreting:

Lao: ASANUMA Chizuko and HIGASHI Satomi

Laotian Sign Language: Ketsana INSISIENGMAY

Japanese Sign Language: TAKASHIMA Yumiko, KOMATSU Tomomi, and SEITA Mami

Laos-Side Coordinator: ASANUMA Chizuko

Organized by: the Foundation Modern Puppet Center

Co-Organized by: The Japan Foundation

Co-Produced by: Foundation Modern Puppet Center, The Japan Foundation

With support from the Japanese Federation of the Deaf, Tokyo Federation of Deaf, Kanagawa Prefecture Federation of the Deaf, Kawasaki City Association of the Deaf, and UNIMA JAPAN

Planned and produced by the Foundation Modern Puppet Center



SHIRAGA Momoko ©Kitagawa Sisters



Lattanakone INSISIENGMAY



Photo by FURUYA Hitoshi

SHIRAGA Momoko & Lattanakone INSISIENGMAY (Laos) “Asian Object Theater: Laos-Japan Collaboration among Deaf and Hearing Performers” First Report: Project Background & Residency in Laos

TANAKA Miyuki

This project is a new international coproduction in which the Laotian theater company Khao Niew and the Japanese Deaf Puppet Theater Hitomi, which both feature collaboration between deaf and hearing performers as well as object theater, were joined by choreographer and director SHIRAGA Momoko as director. Following residencies in Laos (June) and Japan (November), respectively, a work-in-progress performance was held on November 26. This report discusses the first residency, which took place in Laos.

The four-day residency was based out of Khao Niew's studio in the Laotian capital of Vientiane. The city still has a rustic charm that suggests it has nothing to hide, but at the same time, it has changed drastically over the past decade. Throughout this city that doesn't even have addresses, much less a postal service, I spotted the familiar sight of young people fiddling with their smartphones, just like in Japan.

Khao Niew's studio stands on the same plot as the home and studio of Leuthmany INSISIENGMAY, the father of Lattanakone INSISIENGMAY (a.k.a. “Toh”), who heads the theater company. The courtyard is crammed with charming objects made from nuts, driftwood, bark, and sometimes

even everyday items such as plastic bottles and string. Vaguely resembling living creatures, they are all Leuthmany's work.

The relationship between the Modern Puppet Center, to which Deaf Puppet Theater Hitomi belongs, and Laos goes back to 2005, when the Center invited the Lao National Puppet Theatre Troupe Kabong Lao led by Leuthmany to Japan to stage *Dream Grandpa Chang and Grandma Chang Had*. A performance pamphlet from that time explains that Laos has an area roughly equivalent to that of Japan's main island of Honshu, the majority of which is covered in luxuriant forests. Although most Laotians are Buddhists, the existence of spirits known as *phi* is also a cornerstone of everyday life.

Phi include all supernatural beings...from fields, plants, rivers, and forests to ancestors as well as malevolent spirits, goblins, and devils; the deities of places; and the guardian spirits of houses and villages. People alternately fear them, play with them, and pray to them.

It is clear that Leuthmany's creative work is strongly tied to ways of thinking born from the environment of Laos.

He began as an actor but later became a clown in the Lao National Circus. In 1999, while studying in France, he encountered the French theatrical troupe Turak, which pursues object theater. Since Laos is home to many ethnic minorities, performances in the Lao language would not always be understood, so Leuthmany was seeking a method that anyone could understand without words. He was impressed by Turak's work, and at the same time, their use of everyday objects reminded him of Laotian rituals. He formed Kabong Lao in 2000, and it became active as the first



object theater in Laos.

As his father's spiritual successor, Toh also became fascinated by object theater while in France. Although initially resistant to clowning like his father, he was enthralled after actually trying it. However, clowns must follow a script, and though their appearances may change, they always remain human. By contrast, Toh says that he saw potential in the ability of object theater to bring the nonhuman and unknown to life through the power of imagination, even without a story. This led him to found Khao Niew in 2010.

In other words, one might say that the Modern Puppet Center has introduced the generation-spanning efforts of this father and son to create distinctively Laotian object theater to Japan and continually offered them creative opportunities. Joint workshops have been held annually since 2018, and they maintained a warm relationship even during the Covid-19 pandemic, holding online workshops and remote performances linking Japan and Laos. In 2021, Toh and Shiraga Momoko engaged in a dialogue as part of "Asia Center Crosstalk: Performance" organized by the Japan Foundation Asia Center.

In the dialogue, Toh explains object theater as follows: "To keep a broad perspective, empty our souls... In this state, we breathe life into things by touching them. After that, we slowly increase the amount of life

little by little. Then, we try to make the object alive in the present time." Normally, in object theater, a single object is manipulated by multiple actors. However, they move while picking up hints from each other and perceiving life and intent in the object, without any rules. Toh says that it is critical for the actor and object to be "alive and well together."

Although I have devoted a lot of space to describing the concepts of Laotian object theater and *phi* upon which this coproduction is premised, such verbal explanation of these was not given. Instead, the residency began with a movement workshop led by Toh. In pairs, the members practiced sensing each other's presence by moving with their backs together and steering their partners with just the palms of their hands. There was also an exercise in which everyone formed a circle and approached a stick of bamboo one by one. In the afternoon work led by Shiraga, this evolved into linking a single movement one by one. During an exercise aimed at creating a picture by standing still, everyone instantly grasped the situation and produced expressive movements, causing the room to break out in smiles. However, the hope we all felt at that time that there might be more commonalities than we had expected would later be betrayed.

The next day, we left Vientiane to visit the Hmong village where one of the members of Khao Niew was born and raised. There, we were shown





the entire process of wringing the neck of a live chicken and bleeding, dressing, and cooking it, considered one of the greatest acts of hospitality. I had heard from both Leuthmany and Toh that it was becoming difficult to “have shared memories of objects” in Vientiane, but coming from Japan, I had felt Vientiane still had plenty of Laotian touches. However, at the Hmong village, I finally understood what they had meant. Compared to urbanizing Vientiane, old rituals and customs were still deeply ingrained in the village, and its inhabitants seemed to be in closer proximity to *phi* as well.

An impromptu performance at a sculpture park called “Buddha Park” was planned for the final day of the residency. To prepare, the members spent the third day making puppets out of natural materials that they had collected on the way home on the previous day. Leuthmany led the work enthusiastically but impatiently, giving advice to each member in a state of great excitement. (The next day, he confided that each member’s ideas were so interesting that he completely forgot they were supposed to be making puppets for a performance!) On the final day, a flash-mob performance was held in front of the park’s Buddhist statues, with each member using the object they had created.

It was during the performance that a disconnect emerged between the Laotian and Japanese teams. While each member was moving separately, a shift to join together was apparently born among the Laotian team members. However, while one of the Japanese members noticed quickly and joined, others were late to join or never joined at all. According to Toh, the only Japanese member who was able to pick up on the hint was the deaf performer Dakei.

Another interesting disconnect became clear during a discussion on the final day about the direction going forward. Shiraga suggested starting with concepts such as a “gate” or an “entrance/exit” and asked for the other members’ thoughts. The Laotian members responded that they couldn’t answer because the concepts were “too vague.” According to interpreter ASANUMA Chizuko, there is no word or even concept of “abstraction” in the Lao language. Even the existence of the seemingly invisible *phi* is by no means conceptual to Laotians, but rather something concrete and tangible.

The first disconnect will probably resolve with time to a large extent. Some of the Japanese members expressed that they didn’t have enough time to learn about their own objects, much less each other’s, which made it difficult to build relationships. How, then, to overcome the other disconnect, the issue of how to go between the abstract and concrete?

In the aforementioned dialogue hosted by the Japan Foundation, Shiraga explains that she tends “to seek results too quickly” with words and feels that physical expression is “more eloquent.” This coproduction may open up new creative aspects of body language for both the Laotian and Japanese teams. In that sense, I expect the participation of deaf performers, who have a different relationship with their bodies and language to that of hearing performers, to be very meaningful.



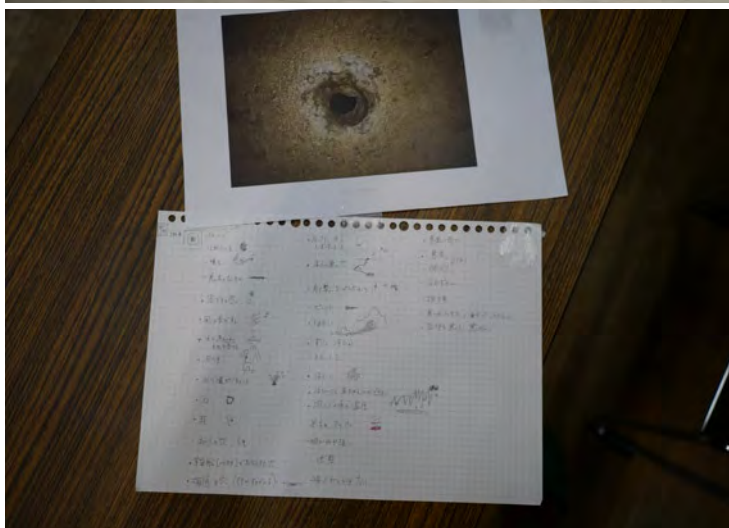
SHIRAGA Momoko & Lattanakone INSISIENGMAI (Laos)
**“Asian Object Theater: Laos-Japan Collaboration
 among Deaf and Hearing Performers”**
 Second Report: Residency in Japan
 TANAKA Miyuki

One of SHIRAGA Momoko's works that left a strong impression on me is *Doko Fuku Kaze no Anata, Koko ni Fuku Kaze no Manimani*, which she created in 2023 as an artist-in-residence at a senior daycare facility in Saitama. The performance was based on a usual day at the facility, centering around a talent show by the users. The facility users could be themselves as performers, joined on stage by both production and care staff in singing songs that held many memories for them, such as “Aisansan” by MISORA Hibari, and unwinding toilet paper all over the venue. The performance exemplified Shiraga's distinctive ability to discover idiosyncrasies of which even individuals themselves are often unaware and to allow these to exist effortlessly on stage through her gentle directing.

The creative process in Japan was based out of the practice room of Deaf Puppet Theater Hitomi (DPTH) for twelve days excluding the work-in-progress performance (and out of the performance venue, Kagurazaka Session House, on the final day). Glimpses of difficulty in communication

with the members of the theater company Khao Niew had already been revealed during a discussion of concepts on the last day of the residency in Laos. Afterwards, at Shiraga's suggestion, the Laotian and Japanese members spent the leadup to the residency in Japan taking photos resembling “gates,” “windows,” or “boundaries” and sharing them on social media. Looking back at the group's exchanges, most consist of posts sending each other pictures and emojis without any words. Concurrently, the members also gathered the objects they wanted to use when reunited in Japan.

I first visited on the second day of practice. Since some members did not travel to Laos and joined for the first time in Japan, a lot of time had apparently been spent on self-introductions on the day prior. The day started with Khao Niew and DPTH discussing what they appreciated in their creative processes. DPTH said they emphasized breathing, and Khao Niew said they focused on everyone moving together in an ensemble. Toh (Lattanakone INSISIENGMAI) gave a more detailed explanation of Khao Niew's way of moving, along with a demonstration. He said that although Khao Niew usually has multiple actors manipulating an object, they move on their own without deciding on a leader or roles and slowly adjust while observing each other. The actors in charge of the head and legs may even switch during a performance. Next, the Laotian and Japanese members tried moving together in mixed teams. There was still some awkwardness, as members moved too much or conversely waited too long for their partners to go first.



Approaches to manipulating objects different from those of both Khao Niew and DPTH were also tried. On this day, Shiraga proposed improvisation with props. The members acted out their associations with an object and then passed it on to the next person, who could also add a different object. While I had heard there was no such thing as “abstraction” in Laos, watching the members use branches and bent wood to resemble various objects such as a microphone and swing, they seemed to have the idea of abstracting the objects away from their original functions. But then, interestingly, they would start vacuuming normally with a vacuum cleaner, for instance. On another day of practice, an exercise in aligning objects, spaces, and the performers’ bodies resembling the *Along* series by the dance duo Aguyoshi was apparently held.

The objects that each member had brought were also revealed on that day. While most were on the smaller side, they were varied in form, ranging from raw materials like bamboo and a rice-steaming basket to ones that already resembled puppets.

The next time I visited was on the sixth day. A game of “pose *karuta*” was played as an ice breaker. A “reader” draws a card with a word such as “bow” or “rocket” and an illustration of a pose and strikes that pose, while the other members race to be the first to grab the picture card depicting the pose, with the readers also alternating in sequence. The game heated up as everyone displayed intense focus and physicality. Since abstract understanding and thinking were required, it first seemed as if the members of Khao Niew might have a difficult time, but they overcame cultural differences by carefully comparing the readers’ poses to the picture cards and ended up getting even more cards than the members of DPTH. It seems that although they may not have a word for it, abstraction is something in which they regularly engage.

Afterwards, the members attempted scenes with a focus on spatial configuration in which they moved with corrugated plastic, which functions to create spaces such as walls, along with objects made from materials like branches or cloth and flashlights. This was repeated several times while occasionally switching roles. Shiraga directed with input from the members, such as suggestions to move more slowly or otherwise adjust the speed of the movements, to change the movement of the flashlights, and to treat not only the objects but also the corrugated plastic as a living thing. Not only words but also visual images were shared during the practice, using the example of the painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter BRUEGEL the Elder, which Shiraga said



was her favorite due to its skillful combination of multiple perspectives and guidance of lines of sight. Last was an exercise in which the members chose one of the photos evoking “gates,” “windows,” and “boundaries” that they had shared on social media and tried to recreate it together.

One of the most memorable moments was on the eighth day. The practice room was divided in half, and the members of Khao Niew and DPTH split into separate teams to create scenes. As Toh looked on, the other Khao Niew members immediately began to practice silently moving their objects with almost no prior discussion. They moved in a well-honed, professional manner while extending their awareness to each other’s movements and auras amid a tense atmosphere. Meanwhile, the DPTH team started by sharing images of the kind of scene they wanted to create. In a mix of Japanese Sign Language and spoken Japanese, they traded heated comments such as, “Unless you’re more specific, I have no idea what’s on your mind!” This tumultuous discussion continued, and they were unable to get to the point of creating movements within the time given. The difference between Khao Niew’s approach, which started from objects, and that of DPTH, which started with sharing images, was made clear.

DPTH explained that their creative process normally starts with a script and puppets, so although they regularly engage in technical discussions and practicing aspects such as how to move the puppets in the story,



they had almost never created a scene by themselves from scratch like today. During a break, DPTH member ADACHI Saki expressed that it had been an interesting experience. Hearing this, producer TSUKADA Chiemi showed an expression of relief. Tsukada first visited Laos in 2005. The country's animism felt compatible with the Japanese worldview, and she says she was impressed by its uniquely Asian object theater bringing to life objects such as natural materials and everyday items rather than puppets. While I had previously assumed that modern puppet theater exists in a different realm from modern drama, it seems that there are actually many commonalities in the sense that the creative process is based on a script and director and the performance style is fixed to some degree. Considering this situation in modern puppet theater, Tsukada says she felt that the members of DPTH needed to reexamine their latent traditional physicality and to create new means of expression utilizing it, and that is why they had a lot to learn from Khao Niew's work.

In that sense, would it be an exaggeration to say that the difference in approaches that emerged when Khao Niew and DPTH split into separate teams is not only the difference between starting with objects and starting with concepts, but also the difference between traditional performing arts and modern drama? There was actually a specific scene during practice on the eleventh day, the last time I visited before the performance, in which the performers were unable to resolve these two approaches and failed to fully integrate with one another. It was a scene using the previously mentioned corrugated plastic. Due to the movements already being laid out, the members threw themselves into their own roles. This brought to light the issue that the scene "didn't look alive." Toh pointed out that the relationships were "not the right kind." ENOMOTO Toru from DPTH added that the scene was "too unified," making it uninteresting to perform. With everyone sharing that perception, Shiraga encouraged the members: "Think about it like a jazz session. You join when there's an opening and you feel like you have a chance. Even though you're performing together, it's okay to be daring. There are no mistakes."

Elements and scenes came together through the exercises conducted as part of daily practice, and a cohesive work began to take shape. With little time remaining before the performance, what course corrections were made to ensure that the idiosyncrasies of the members and the differences between them would be preserved?

SHIRAGA Momoko & Lattanakone INSISIENGMAI (Laos)
**“Asian Object Theater: Laos-Japan Collaboration
 among Deaf and Hearing Performers”**
 Third Report: Performance and Reflection
 TANAKA Miyuki

Following residencies in Japan and Laos, the performance was held on November 26, 2023. It was billed as a “coproduction work-in-progress performance,” and the announcements, distributed pamphlets, and opening remarks gently reminded viewers that this was merely one waypoint along a creative process that would continue in the future. Rather than a finished work, it was a performance containing many elements improvised on the basis of the relationships that had been built so far. Quite a few of the members actually stated that they wished the audience would come see their practice, as that was the “most interesting” part.

I will start by going over the content of the performance. Lasting about one hour, it consisted of the following five main scenes based on various exercises tried during the practice while also incorporating ideas inspired by the features of the venue, Kagurazaka Session House.

Entrance: The Scene of the Branches

In the first scene, all the performers slowly emerged on stage, each holding a different branch. First, they stood still while taking note of each other’s presence. After a while, one would move, and then someone else would move as if in response and pause once more. This spread to all the performers. Each one seemed like a separate life-form, but all together, they also resembled a single organism. Now and again, restrained, rhythmic music could be heard. As the performers’ movements gradually grew quicker and the lights dimmed, large shadows appeared on the walls and floor. Most of the performers exited, and the deaf members of Khao Niew pretended that the larger branches were a swing, with two members supporting the swing while rocking back and forth with it. Then, one of them suddenly pulled out one of the branches and posed with it like a nunchaku before exiting the stage. Another member used the branches as a broom and a motorbike before exiting. The remaining deaf member pretended the longest branch was a boat oar and exited the stage while slowly rowing.

Recreation of an Image of an “Entrance/Exit” by DPTH

The members of Deaf Puppet Theater Hitomi (DPTH) emerged on stage with an object that looked like a long vine. One member of Khao Niew emerged holding a photo. The two parties greeted each other, and then the Khao Niew member pointed at the photo and made a gesture representing the hole it depicted. He said something in Lao, which the DPTH members could not understand, but they repeated the same gesture and made a circle with the vine. However, something seemed to be missing. The DPTH members brought cloth, cookware, and a large bag from the wings of the stage and acted like something was emerging from the hole. More objects such as umbrellas, ropes, and blankets appeared. As “The Blue Danube” by Johann STRAUSS II played majestically, finally, one performer wrapped himself in a blanket and crawled around the floor.

Others covered him with the vine circle, and another two entered the circle, pretending it was a bath. The lights flickered, signaling the end of the scene.

The Dance of the Rice by Khao Niew

This performance made use of the rice-steaming baskets and mosquito net brought by Khao Niew. Three male performers spread the net wide from inside one of the baskets and moved it freely across the stage like a living creature. After a while, the net was placed back in the basket, and the three men lay on the floor around it. Then, another man appeared and covered the three with the net. As he lifted up one end of the net, the three men stood up and formed a new creature, with the wicker container that had previously held the basket as its face. Meanwhile, two members of DPTH emerged with items such as a rice cooker and paddles and sat down on stage left. They took the pot out of the cooker and began to create sounds by solemnly dropping rice and stones into it in a ritualistic manner. Drawn to the sounds of the pot, the creature moved this way and that as if controlled by the intensifying sounds. It spit out wooden sticks and then fell to the floor as if exhausted. After a while, the four men, appearing to have returned to their senses, stood up and emerged from the net while swatting at mosquitoes. They rolled up the net and placed it back inside the container. Then, they flipped it inside the container like a steaming hot rice cake, and everyone tossed it back and forth.

Improvisation with Props by a Mixed Team and Debut of the Created Objects

Five performers emerged with triangular stands normally used to support set panels, etc. Some of the performers surrounded the stands, and others clung to the wall and column as if unconcerned. The stands were successively likened to a mallet for pounding rice cakes, a dance pole, a shower, a dental chair (!), a hoe, a gun, and so on. Reminiscent of the improvisation with props conducted during the practice, the comical movements and ideas often sparked laughter from the venue. Eventually, everyone exited the stage, and three of the performers reappeared with the triangular stands. Swarming with animal-like movements, they gathered in the center of the stage and began to swirl around in a circle. The remaining members emerged while manipulating the objects they had created, either alone or in pairs. Finally, the lights dimmed, and an object consisting of twigs hanging from a string appeared along with a light shining on it. At first, the light followed the object, but their relationship gradually switched.

Recreation of an Image and Finale with Corrugated Plastic

All of the performers emerged with corrugated plastic and a rattan blind. SHIRAGA Momoko also emerged and showed the performers a photo, telling them “This is today’s theme.” The performers conversed in sign language and gestures and then began moving with their objects. It seemed that they were to create a single image together once again. However, this time, once they had taken up their approximate positions, the lights dimmed. The performers began to walk slowly while holding the corrugated plastic from behind. Lights also appeared, illuminating the scene from behind. Some of the performers bent the plastic, some walked while moving it sideways, and others shook it or rotated it around their bodies. Meanwhile, the rattan blind was transformed by being twisted



Photo by FURUYA Hitoshi

and shaken. As the lights changed from warm to white, the plastic was rolled up and returned to a wall-like state while the performers gradually exited the stage. Finally, only the rattan blind remained on stage, wrapped around a light placed on the floor.

To me, it seemed as if the overall performance was made up of the respective approaches of Khao Niew, who create images from objects, and DPTH, who manipulate objects after sharing images, nested while remaining as far apart as ever. In specific terms, the scenes of sharing an image depicted in a photo and then recreating it with the performers' bodies and objects in (2) and (5), as well as the scene of pretending to use objects for various purposes in the first part of (4), were image-led and left a strong verbal impression. On the other hand, the dance of the rice in (3) evolved from an act that Khao Niew often performs by way of introduction, and thus it established a strong story. It also fit well with the performative presence of the members of DPTH, and many viewers probably found it to feel the most complete of all the scenes. A multitude of elements were scattered throughout the performance, as if getting various trial and error out on the table to the greatest extent possible. However, I sensed the most potential in the scene of manipulating objects in the latter part of (4). In particular, the sight of Toh (Lattanakone INSISIENGMAI) and Dakei manipulating an object made from thin bamboo poles and rubber seemed to imply the impending birth of a never-before-seen creature.

Despite making gradual progress, why did the two teams remain rather isolated? What is the "Asian object theater" advocated by the project in the first place, and how different is it from puppet theater? Although I

am unsure whether this report will be able to reach any conclusions, I would like to examine these questions based on the post-performance discussion, a closed-door review session held after the performance, and interviews with the members.

As I noted in my second report, Khao Niew and DPTH are theater companies with starkly different creative approaches. Khao Niew takes a disciplined approach despite sharing the simple doctrine of "bringing objects to life," while DPTH normally acts out a story based on a script and puppets with the actors and puppets in synchronization. Since this production did not use a script, the DPTH members ended up heatedly discussing their differing opinions in a very human manner. Shiraga described the differences between the two theater companies as "differences in their values for how a group should be" and said that for this reason, she tried to find commonalities by introducing a material with which none of the members were familiar, without being biased toward either approach.

However, the issue of verbal abstraction presenting a barrier for both parties, which emerged on the last day of the residency in Laos, had not yet been fully resolved. Although the members interacted by posting images to social media until Khao Niew arrived in Japan, production in Japan felt largely language driven. The lack of time probably had the greatest bearing on this. Excluding preliminary inspection of the theater, the production period was only about two weeks in total. When a theatrical performance is planned to present results at the end of such a short production period, a certain amount of time will inevitably be spent preparing for it. There was far from ample time to simply engage with each other's creative approaches. Under these conditions, the members



Photo by FURUYA Hitoshi

of Khao Niew would often be at a loss as soon as words were exchanged. One of the members, Khamneesone LIYANG, said that when he received too many verbal explanations at the start, his mind would go blank from the exhaustion of trying to understand them, so he asked interpreter ASANUMA Chizuko to summarize them more concisely. In a later interview, Toh also indicated that he had consistently felt uncomfortable about being asked for an explanation whenever he made any moves.

As Toh explained in the post-performance discussion, Khao Niew's creative approach takes particular time because the group values ideas that emerge through dialogue with materials by engaging with, observing, and actually moving them. First sharing images and then acting could safely be called the exact opposite of their creative approach. In the review session, they indicated that they found it difficult to look at an image and then recreate it, because they believe that images are born only after using objects. For Khao Niew, images are not symbolic but rather inseparable from actual existence. However, Toh had prior experiences of coproduction with overseas theater companies. Weren't some of those productions also led by images or concepts? In response to this question, he answered that "as long as we are able to share how to approach the objects based on materials, leading with a concept is not an issue." In other words, he apparently felt that at the current stage, they were not yet able to share how they approached the objects.

This may be related to the fact that for Khao Niew, the creators and users of the objects are the same. Khao Niew's sequence is apparently to start by engaging in dialogue with the materials without first explaining the image, and then the person who breathed life into the materials actually uses them. Although it seems to be in the process of changing recently, Toh stated that until his generation, objects could be created while thinking about how to breathe life into them by moving them. On the other hand, as ENOMOTO Toru explained when he represented DPTH in the post-performance discussion, DPTH starts with a script, and the creators of the puppets are separate from the actors, so the actors seldom engage with the materials. Toh indicated that he did not find separate creators to be a bad thing from the standpoints of completion and aesthetics. However, the differences in creative approaches may have accumulated considerably as differences in how relationships formed between the actors and materials.

Although it is worth noting that one feature of the project is the fact that it is a coproduction with hearing and deaf performers, I feel like it is not yet ready to make full use of this feature. However, the deaf performers are more conscious of honing their physical sensitivity than the other members, and therefore, they often seemed to naturally fit in with Khao Niew's approach. This was particularly true for Dakei, who has a background in dance. He explained that since he had experience with "emptying" his body and "letting another soul (thing) from elsewhere enter it" through dance, he felt comfortable investing a soul into an object, even though it was the opposite approach. He added that the dance approach involves first learning to "let go of the self" and that there are similarities between this and moving objects rather than images, which agreed with Toh's statement that "bringing an object to life means building a relationship with it by losing your ego and emptying yourself before touching it."

Although the corrugated plastic that Shiraga introduced as "a material with which none of the members were familiar" was not yet used to full effect in the performance, many of the members said they found the scene interesting or felt it had potential. Corrugated plastic serves to partition or transform spaces but is also an artificial object on which



Photo by FURUYA Hitoshi

it is difficult to project expressions. At the same time, since it is large enough to cover human bodies, coordinating with the surrounding actors is impossible without honing one's awareness of their movements. In fact, more than a few members mentioned that they were able to maintain eye contact and communicate well in the corrugated plastic scene. While they saw potential in these properties of the corrugated plastic, it is interesting that none of the members felt like they had yet succeeded in breathing life into it. In that sense, it seems like the production is not yet at the point of the members being able to fully dismantle the concept of "breathing life" into something and apply it to their bodies and objects. Of course, it is not the goal of the project for DPTH to master Khao Niew's techniques, but it will be difficult for them to find middle ground without an understanding of the differences in their fundamental stance of "handling objects."

Finally, what is object theater? The members of Khao Niew might cringe to hear me still attempting to define it at this point, but for the sake of our understanding, let us define it for now as "a performing art that creates stories by bringing objects to life." It may at first seem like the objects would be where cultural differences come into play, but I believe we ought to consider that it may actually be the concept of life. Given that there is no hierarchy among humans and other beings in animism, a "human" appearance does not necessarily imply that something is alive. In addition, "moving energetically" can be thought of as only a small fraction of an instant of life. Looking back, there was an episode during the residency in Laos when everyone witnessed the butchering of a live chicken at a Hmong village. While it was an expression of hospitality, this intimacy with the reality and feel of a living chicken dying and being transformed into food might (although it was vanishing even in Laos) be connected to the attitude of Khao Niew, a theater company that deals with the concept of life, toward object theater.

As I noted at the start, this project will continue into the next fiscal year. What common ground will two groups with the seemingly similar and yet different methodologies of object theater and puppet theater find? It seems likely that the presence of Shiraga, who belongs to neither group, will become increasingly important. Shiraga, who calls herself a director who "showcases individuals," stated that while she recognized that eliminating individuality was one approach to handling objects, she wanted to make both the objects and performers equally visible at the same resolution instead. Issues caused by various differences gradually emerged in this coproduction. As it progresses in the future, ample time

for the members to take in physical sensations and engage in dialogue with the objects while setting aside any attempts to immediately arrive at a methodology will surely enrich this coproduction above all else.

The Japan Foundation
FY2023 International Creations in Performing Arts
Process Observer Reports

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Published by: The Japan Foundation (JF)
YOTSUYA CRUCE, 1-6-4 Yotsuya, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 160-0004
<https://www.jpf.go.jp/e/>
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Published September 24, 2024

