

Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL (Thailand) and
SAKAMOTO Ryuichi

“A Conversation with the Sun (VR)” First Report: Background to the Coproduction and Observation of Rehearsals

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Background to the Coproduction

A Conversation with the Sun (VR) by film director Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL (1970–) is a coproduction with Arts Commons Tokyo.¹ According to Weerasethakul, the title means coming into contact with the source of all life and art while observing and walking through the world illuminated by the light of the Sun. The work will show viewers footage and landscapes realized using virtual reality (VR) technology from all angles while they listen to ambient sounds recorded by Weerasethakul in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the Peruvian Amazon, as well as music composed by SAKAMOTO Ryuichi in response. Weerasethakul will use the “(virtual) conversation with the Sun” that emerges through contact with these dreamlike scenes as a starting point to expand the future of landscapes, humanity, and technology that he has continually explored.

The coproduction began with Arts Commons Tokyo representative director and art producer SOMA Chiaki commissioning a new VR performance from Weerasethakul. According to Soma, around June 2021, she asked him to create a VR work and submit it to the international art festival “Aichi Triennale 2022.” This was because she felt that a VR work not only would be highly feasible despite the COVID-19 pandemic but also had the potential to redefine human perception. When Weerasethakul first received the commission, he was worried about his lack of knowledge and creative experience with VR.² However, he decided to join the project after seeing some of the past VR works that Soma had curated. Next, in October of that year, a meeting was held with the VR technical team, and the decision was made to collaborate with Sakamoto. Weerasethakul, who took a deep interest in Sakamoto’s music, was the one who proposed the collaboration to the production team. In March 2022, Weerasethakul visited Aichi Prefectural Art Theater with TANIGUCHI Katsuya from Rhino Studios, which specializes in creating VR works and games, and VR adviser NOMURA Tsuyoshi.³ There, they fleshed out the image of the work, and in June of that year, Weerasethakul recorded ambient sounds of the Amazon while staying in Peru. At the rehearsals in August that I attended as an Observer, I was able to watch elements created in separate locations be assembled and set up as a performance space.

Rehearsals

Schedule: August 23–26, 2022 (I joined only on August 23 and 24.)

Location: Large Rehearsal Room, Aichi Prefectural Art Theater

A Conversation with the Sun (VR) is divided into two parts, each 30 minutes long. Viewers watch a movie on a screen in the first part and then view VR footage in the same space in the second part.⁴ Both parts can be viewed while moving through that space. This composite structure mutually expands the real and virtual worlds by way of “sleep,” “dreams,” and “the Sun,” themes that Weerasethakul has long taken interest in.

VR is technology that simulates the experience of being in artificial

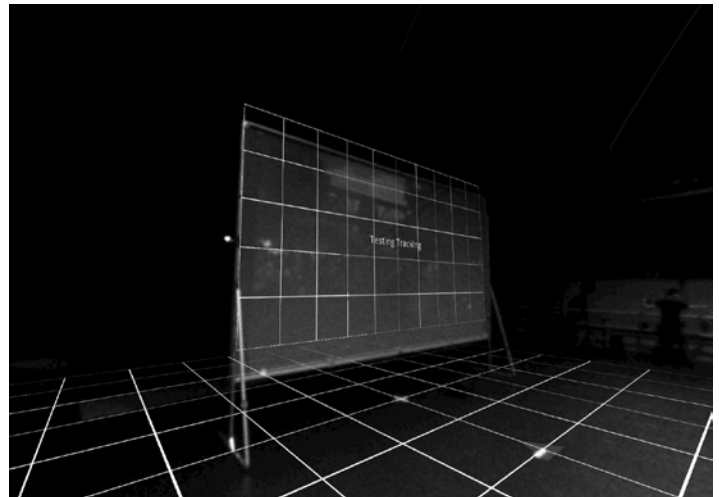


Figure 1: The tracking test screen (Credit: Arts Commons Tokyo)



Figure 2: Staff conducting the tracking test (Photo: Kwon Sanghae)

environments created on a computer, as if transcending time and space. In ordinary VR works, the viewer can no longer see the real-world space after putting on the VR head-mounted display (HMD). A key concept in *A Conversation with the Sun (VR)* is the creation of a sense that the actual and virtual spaces are connected by reproducing the same images that exist in the actual space (the Large Rehearsal Room), such as the movie on the screen and the patterns on the floor, in the 360-degree virtual space.⁵ To actually realize this kind of mechanism, a great deal of ingenuity is required on both the technical and operational sides, including not only installing the screen and projectors for the set and checking the lighting and sound, but also operating and controlling the HMDs, programming the VR, and fixing any glitches in the VR footage.

During the rehearsals on August 23 and 24, installation of the screen and projectors, a tracking test, and a VR footage test were conducted in that order. On August 23, a freestanding screen was assembled in the center of the Large Rehearsal Room, and two movie projectors were installed on either side of it. That afternoon, a tracking test was conducted to confirm that the cameras on the HMDs were correctly obtaining spatial position data. If tracking was not performed correctly, the VR plane would be tilted, making it difficult to view the footage. Therefore, it had to be checked for tilting while wearing a test HMD with a gridded screen (Fig. 1). If tilting was discovered, patterns called feature points would need to be added to the space or the movie projected on the screen changed to

one with less movement to make it easier for the HMD to obtain position data. As the movie was difficult to track, the production team proposed switching it to a different one (Fig. 2) but eventually remedied the problem by laying carpets in three colors on the floor in a random pattern (Fig. 3).

In the VR footage test, everyone viewed an about 30-minute demo video that Rhino Studios had created based on a storyboard drawn by Weerasethakul. Afterwards, Weerasethakul himself pointed out areas for improvement related to specific images in the footage, computer-generated effects, and the frame rate (Fig. 4). He asked the production team to revise elements such as the texture of a huge cloth that comes flying from afar, afterimages around the outlines of light and shadow, and the speed of walking figures. The VR production team led by Rhino Studios and Arts Commons Tokyo sought to enhance the quality of the finished work by proposing and implementing specific methods of improvement in response to Weerasethakul's feedback.



Figure 3: Carpets used to create feature points (Photo: Kwon Sanghae)

- 1 *A Conversation with the Sun (VR)* is an extension of an installation by Weerasethakul with the same title (*A Conversation with the Sun*, exhibited from May 28 to July 10, 2022, at Bangkok CityCity Gallery), in which he reconfigured fragments of footage that he had previously shot using AI technology.
- 2 While this was Weerasethakul's first time working on a VR project, he had already expressed interest in doing so around 2017. SASAKI Atsushi, "APICHPONG WEERASETHAKUL—Fever Room," The Japan Foundation website, July 5, 2017 (last viewed September 13, 2022) <https://asiawa.jpf.go.jp/en/culture/features/f-ah-tpam-apichatpong-weerasethakul/>
- 3 Rhino Studios led by VR creator Taniguchi Katsuya is a company involved in a wide range of cultural and artistic VR productions, spanning the performing arts, visual art, music, and games.
- 4 In this report, "movie" refers to the film projected on both sides of the screen and "footage" to the images viewed in VR.
- 5 In the early stages, the plan was for the project to combine augmented reality (AR) and VR technology in a work that would show see-through camera footage together with effects and animation, eventually turning into VR. However, due to the characteristics of the HMDs used, a see-through camera could not be implemented if there was too much contrast between the depictions of the Sun and shadows. Because of this technical issue, the project ended up only using VR.



Figure 4: Weerasethakul in a meeting (second from right) (Photo: Kwon Sanghae)