

Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL (Thailand) and
SAKAMOTO Ryuichi

“A Conversation with the Sun (VR)”

Third Report: Performance

KWON Sanghae

Owing to his health condition, I was unable to interview one of the leaders of the international coproduction, composer SAKAMOTO Ryuichi. Before reporting on the performances, I would like to share the background to Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL commissioning music from Sakamoto, along with an anecdote related to the production.

Weerasethakul proposed the collaboration to Sakamoto in October 2021, urging him to have fun with the production while resting. The two dined together in March 2022 and discussed Sakamoto’s health issues as well as books they had read recently.¹ In August of that year, Weerasethakul shared his image of the music he would like to commission with Sakamoto, along with a written explanation of the content and structure of the work, a storyboard, ambient sounds that he had recorded in the Amazon, and so on. He proposed details about the music, such as further explaining that it should be “Something between natural and man-made” “Something emotional” and drawing a timeline of the parts that would feature Sakamoto’s music (Fig. 1). Sakamoto’s music used in the performances was completed a month later, at the beginning of September.

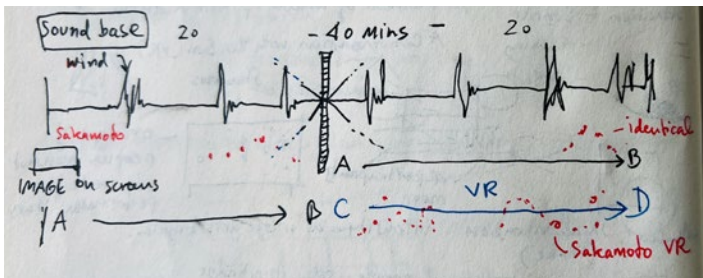


Figure 1: The music timeline that Weerasethakul sent to Sakamoto

Performances

On October 5, 2022, I traveled to Nagoya to attend one of the performances of *A Conversation with the Sun (VR)* as well as a talk event featuring Weerasethakul. This final report describes the outcome of the international coproduction, challenges, and future prospects.

First, I will discuss the artistic attainment of the work while touching on its overall content and the experience of audiences. Before entering the venue, viewers receive explanations from staff on how to use the VR, precautions on bumping into other audience members or the set, and what to do if there is a problem during viewing. Upon entering the venue, a two-sided screen can be seen hanging from the center of the ceiling, along with people wearing HMDs surrounding it (Fig. 2).

The work is divided into two parts, each 30 minutes long. Because the 15 audience members in the first half continue to view the second half in the same space, there are always about 30 audience members in the venue, excluding the first and last timeslots. The movie projected onto the screen in the first half depicts segmented events such as sleeping people, scenes of a night market, structures with neon signs, a crowd gathered in a plaza, and bushes swaying in the wind. While viewing fragmented images of

evening progressing into night, audience members are transported to a time and space where the boundaries between dreams and reality and between the unconscious and cognition are blurred. The movie can be viewed while sitting in the chairs along the walls of the venue or while walking around the space. However, as the venue is scattered with people wearing HMDs, I had to move around to locations where the movie was more visible while watching it.

At the end of the first half, the audience members who were viewing the VR take off their HMDs and leave the venue. Then, the audience members from the first half view the VR (Fig. 3). After the HMD is put on, Weerasethakul’s movie is visible in the central frame with multiple small balls of light around it. Audience members can explore the space without bumping into others or the set by remaining aware of the positions of the balls of light and the frame. If they get too close to their surroundings, a gridded wall called the “guardian” appears and alerts them of the danger of contact.

While looking at the central frame, six or seven frames appear floating in the distance. They show footage of people sleeping indoors or outdoors and trees swaying in the wind. The floating frames disappear, and then the floor transforms into reddish-brown ground, and stones of various sizes slowly fall from the sky. As piano music composed by Sakamoto mixes with ambient jungle sounds, the surrounding scenery switches to a cave. Emotional music briefly brings back vaguely familiar memories and images. Then, a clay statue suddenly appears in a corner of the cave. As the Sun moves closer to the statue’s head, the statue’s eyes melt. The entire space slowly rotates counterclockwise, and the ceiling of the cave starts to open up. The footage ends with the Sun floating up toward the ceiling and dividing into countless balls of light.



Figure 2 (Top) / Figure 3 (Bottom): *A Conversation with the Sun (VR)* (Aichi Triennale 2022, performance photo)

Photo: Shun Sato

What is notable about the work is that audience members are not restricted to their seats or to a particular perspective. They can view the entire space, including the movie screen, from their desired position or while walking around wearing an HMD. This complex structure conforms with Weerasethakul's recent tendency to extend his experimentation with film through the two-dimensional medium of the screen into the three-dimensional time-space of the performing arts. The experience of moving between real and virtual (dream) spaces through the introduction of VR and the induction of movement in the audience are features that differentiate this work from his past ones.

Interviews

Within the production process, Weerasethakul regarded “audience movement” —audience members exploring the space according to their own lines of flow and sight—as an important component of the work and aimed to create a presentation space in which both people watching the movie and those experiencing the VR can move around. I will explain the significance of the audience movement and the process of realizing it with quotes from interviews I conducted with Weerasethakul and production coordinator SHIBATA Haruka (Arts Commons Tokyo).²

Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul

—Tell me about the composition of the work, in which seated audience members and those walking around are in the same space.

Weerasethakul: It's like I'm showing my vision for how we'll exchange ideas and emotions in the future. The first part is experienced while seated in a chair or walking around, and the second is experienced while moving around the installation in VR. By synchronizing these experiences, my aim is to activate memories through the movie—to make the experience of watching the movie not just a passive one. The work can inspire a physical experience in audience members, as if in a dream. As the technology is currently still in its infancy, you feel a sense of wearing the gear. But in the future, I suspect that it'll be possible to have very natural experiences, and immersing oneself in a fictional environment will become common.

Operational techniques are necessary to guide the movement of audience members, because any contact between viewers or with the set not only affects viewing, but also puts viewers in danger while in a vulnerable state. Production coordinator Shibata described the actual operational situation as follows.

Interview with Shibata Haruka

—It seems like the operational techniques of Arts Commons Tokyo for the performing arts were very important in realizing audience movement. How did the audience movement envisioned by Weerasethakul actually manifest itself?

Shibata: The audience members moved around a lot. There were situations that put a large burden on the operational side, so I think improvement might be necessary. When you have 30 people in the same space, some move around a lot, whereas others don't move at all. My impression is that audience movement varied by individual. Within the first audience, there were a lot of people who walked around quickly

even when using the VR, which was quite dangerous, so we made an announcement asking them to walk around slowly before they entered the venue and repeated that same message while they were wearing the HMDs. After that, they moved around more slowly.

Evaluation of Project and Future Prospects

As I have already mentioned, the VR used in the work is a medium that holds new potential for art appreciation but also has various technical limitations.

In artistic terms, the work has important implications in the sense that Weerasethakul's aim of an experiment with expanding the concept of a movie has taken on further potential through VR technology. Rather than simply showing audiences Weerasethakul's movie in VR, the work gives them an integrated experience of the disparate elements of a movie, VR footage, and music in a presentation space that emphasizes audience movement. It could be said that the artistic significance of the work is the viewing experience thus realized, an experience of seeming to traverse dreams and reality.

The VR technology that supports these artistic aspects currently has several limitations. Examples include the low image quality of the VR footage and the motion sickness produced by the scene of rotating inside the cave. These technical issues with VR in the present can be resolved by improvements to VR performance in the longer term. The act of production using new technology itself is surely not as important as accumulating expertise in production processes and operational frameworks to realize a richer experience for audiences.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Sakamoto Ryuichi, Rhino Studios, and Arts Commons Tokyo collaborated systematically while sharing an overall picture of the work and successfully established an operational framework on-site. In this sense, I believe that the international coproduction, comprising the remote production due to the Covid-19 pandemic and on-site rehearsals, will provide an excellent example for VR in future international coproductions.

What implications does the coproduction have for Weerasethakul himself, and how will it lead to future prospects? I would like to conclude by quoting some of his impressions of the VR production that he shared in an interview with producer SOMA Chiaki.³

- VR allows the viewer to simulate, which leads to a more expansive and dreamlike experience of the world. This becomes very important in navigating the audience through the space.
- VR effortlessly conveys rich sensations from every angle. It reflects humans' ability to see the world beyond our own viewpoint.

Through this VR production, Weerasethakul appears to have obtained a critical vantage point for exploring the audience's movement and lines of sight. However, at the same time, he maintains a cautious attitude toward “the fact that technology comes to the forefront and emotion is forgotten when talking about VR.” His proposal of the collaboration to Sakamoto was the result of him focusing on the underlying commonalities between Sakamoto's music, which mixes traditional instruments with futuristic sound production, and his own art blending film with other media.⁴ While expanding the range of human perception and expression through technology, he always seems to shine a light on the touches of humanity that spill out. I believe that it is Weerasethakul's inexhaustible

inquisitiveness and vigilance toward technology that will lead to a driving force for expanding humanity's imagination with regard to VR and art in the future.

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- 1 The books included *Freedom from the Known* by Indian-born writer Jiddu KRISHNAMURTI.
 - 2 In this production, Shibata was responsible for clerical work, interpreting for Weerasethakul, and production coordination.
 - 3 "Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Interviewer: Soma Chiaki)," *Apichatpong Weerasethakul "A Conversation with the Sun (VR)" Performance Pamphlet, 2022*, page 4
 - 4 *Ibid.*, page 5