

SHIGA Lieko, Merzbow, Balázs PÁNDI (Hungary), and Richard PINHAS (France)

## “Merzbow, Balázs Pándi & Richard Pinhas with Lieko Shiga: ‘Bipolar’” Third Report: New Horizons Opened Up by a “Visual Concert” MORIYAMA Naoto

### The Performances

On October 8 and 9, two performances of *Bipolar* were held as scheduled at Kyoto Art Theater Shunjuza. I was able to attend both.

As described in my previous reports, a massive screen was installed at the back of the huge theater, which was about 18 meters wide. The three musicians were lined up in front of it with Merzbow (AKITA Masami) to the left from the audience's viewpoint (stage right), Balázs PÁNDI (drums) in the center, and Richard PINHAS (guitar) to the right (stage left). SHIGA Lieko's video operating booth was set up near the back of the elevated walkway through the audience (the entrance to the actors' waiting room). A large digital counter with red numerals was projected above the proscenium arch, which began ticking as soon as the performances started.

Due to the nature of improvisation, describing the ever-changing details of the work is difficult and will tend to become incoherent. However, if I were to sum up the “visual concert,” I might say that it was actually each audience member fully feeling the trajectory of the approximately hour-long “once-in-a-lifetime encounter” between the tremendous “explosion of sound” from the musicians and the huge, constantly transforming and shifting images.

From my perspective after viewing the performances, the main features of the work can be summarized as follows.

- (1) While concerts by “explosive” noise artists such as Merzbow are normally held at small music clubs, this work was staged at a large theater with the capacity for large-scale theatrical productions.
- (2) Musicians and an artist who have already built global reputations collaboratively created a highly unique “improvisation space.” Furthermore, unlike your garden-variety music video or VJ performance, in which either the “music” or “video” dominate and the aim is mainly to create a stylish ambience with appropriate harmony, this collaboration demonstrated the potential for a new kind of live performance in which the two balance each other in a true sense.
- (3) Video creator Shiga Lieko, a photographer who employs a unique production process very similar to that of theater or dance productions, ventured into the realm of video improvisation, a new horizon of expression for her. Furthermore, the video she created strongly reflected the concepts she has explored throughout her career as a photographer.

With regard to (1), it is difficult for me to make comparisons, as I myself am not an expert in noise music. However, when I interviewed multiple audience members familiar with Merzbow after the performances, they said that both the volume and sound quality were very different from what they had experienced at live music clubs. Even producer TSUKAHARA Yuya said he “got goosebumps” when he heard the sound from the



The audience just before the performance on the first day

specially installed large-theater speakers during the rehearsals. Thus, it seems accurate to say that the performances achieved a sense of texture and volume that would not have been possible at a music club.

### The Core of Collaboration

Nonetheless, it is clearly (2) that was at the core of collaboration in this international coproduction. How can a unique improvisation space in which “video” and “music” balance each other in a true sense be created? In that very sense, the fact that Shiga's video in this work is backed by a single flow or force invoking vast voices and narratives while maintaining a certain fragmentation presents a crucial approach to that question.

For example, the first roughly 15 minutes of the work were constructed around footage of various figures walking as if hurried along by something, each at their own speed, on top of a seawall built after the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami. These “walking scenes,” in which Shiga herself said she continued to experiment with various “speeds” over the course of a three-year runup period, are an intense eruption of the accumulation of time within Shiga as an artist as she exhaustively probed the relationship between the act of photography and its subjects through the disaster by which she herself was also affected, as well as its leadup and aftermath, and provide the frame on which the work is based. The music responded accordingly to this intensity through improvisation by each performer, and video operator Shiga, in turn, responded to the music in the form of real-time “improvisational editing.” *Bipolar* as a work consisted of the frenzied blending of these processes throughout the approximately hour-long performances.

That being said, Shiga, who revered the musicians and had a deep understanding of their characteristics, said she worried that verbally sharing the narrative elements surrounding the “disaster” with the two foreign musicians in advance would end up weakening the energy at stake in the “improvisation.” This point aligned conceptually with Tsukahara, who chose not to hold a dress rehearsal (refer to my second report). For *Bipolar*, which is substantively different in nature from a packaged work, each performance was not only a “work” but also a collaborative “dialogue.”

The performances were truly overwhelming, lasting about 70 minutes on the first day and slightly under 60 minutes on the second. At the same time, both had a subtly different feel. However, before describing these differences, I must mention the fact that the three musicians actually looked closely at Shiga's video during both performances. The

video monitors installed onstage helped the musicians follow the video in progress without looking behind them. However, in addition to the monitors, there were situations in which the two musicians other than Balázs PÁNDI, who had the video directly behind him, escalated their playing while occasionally gazing back at the massive screen. In that sense, one might say a nonverbal “dialogue” was firmly established within the improvisation space through Shiga’s video.

Some of the most critical moments in the international coproduction were found in the “dialogue” between Shiga’s video and Pándi’s drumming. According to multiple sources, immediately after he finished playing on the first day, Pándi said that he “sensed an intense dynamism in the video” and felt something that strongly stimulated his own musicality in the previously mentioned “walking scenes” in particular. During the first day’s performance, Pándi kept drumming at full power for about 70 minutes, with almost no breaks. It was remarkable how the drums asserted their presence without becoming lost in the explosive noise. Afterwards, rather intensive discussions were held backstage ahead of the next day’s performance. These discussions would end up making the performances on the first and second days feel subtly different.

Pándi suggested that “it would be better to keep the performance time within 60 minutes due to the physical limitations of full-powered drumming” —in other words, that it should be shortened by about 10 minutes. However, Shiga’s collection of footage was constructed to form a complete story in about 65 to 70 minutes. Thus, shortening it by 10 minutes would require a change of no small magnitude.

The next day, Shiga and video assistant SATO Takahiro arrived at the theater at 9:00 a.m., 10 hours before the start of the performance, to take on the task of “reconfiguration.” When I finished viewing the second day’s performance, I realized that the structure of the latter half of the work was very different from that on the first day. Footage that had been presented over the course of about 30 minutes on the previous day was condensed into about 20 minutes on the second, and countless images were layered within mere moments as if to generate a subliminal effect. If a sense of keeping track in a linear fashion was dominant on the first day, on the second day, I felt a stronger sense of doing so three-dimensionally. When I asked Shiga about this at a later date, she said she “was able to do live editing much more freely on the second day by planning for a climax during the last fifteen minutes.” The feeling of three-dimensionality

was the work of complex live operations that were not structured as a package but rather generated and altered moment to moment.

### New Horizons Opened Up by the Project

As observed above, this work set sophisticated artistic goals surrounding “improvisation” that served as the basis for sophisticated, intensive technical and artistic dialogues, mainly during the performances. Attendance was 344 people on the first day and 336 on the second. The fact that the work drew a wide audience including not only fans of the performing arts but also those of fields such as music and visual arts might be called a planned outcome. However, in some ways, it is possible to take the view that the outcome was “confusing.” This is because although it definitely represented a major accomplishment in artistic terms, we don’t yet really have the language to critique it accurately. The fact is that Shiga Lieko’s followers can only speak from a visual-arts perspective, whereas followers of Merzbow and noise will tend to lean toward music. How should the encounter between “video” and “music” in the improvisation space, along with the as-yet-unknown sensations born from that encounter, actually be put into words? The work is perhaps a challenge posed to contemporary art audiences in general, including me as I write this report.

Sometime after the performances, I had the opportunity to discuss them once again with Shiga, albeit online. She explained as follows. As the practitioner of the real-time video editing, she definitely felt that she had established “communication” with the musicians during the improvisation, which was an amazing experience for her. In particular, the sense of freedom that she enjoyed during the jam session in the final 15 minutes of the second day was one that she would never have found elsewhere. Shiga said that Merzbow’s sound had commonalities with the “sound” she perceived while taking photographs, and that Balázs Pándi definitely led the musical team. Furthermore, after the performances, she gained confidence in the immense expressive potential of the real-time video editing in which she had engaged. If possible, she said she would like to develop this method in some way starting with her upcoming solo exhibitions.

It seems safe to say that this international coproduction is having a strong impact on one photographer’s future.



Photographer: INOUE Yoshikazu  
Credit: Kyoto Experiment