



Junya Noguchi

Kukangendai

<http://kukangendai.com/>

Soto

<http://soto-kyoto.jp/>

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Photo: Maezawa Hideto



Artist Interview アーティスト・インタビュー

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Kukangendai's change of rhythm, Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーミングアーツの新世界

The recording label HEADZ run by critic Atsushi Sasaki has produced many experimental stage art creations and collaborations with numerous musicians, including 口口口 (Kuchiroro), Shuta Hasunuma, Sangatsu, Yoshio Otani and others. Among them is also the analog 3-piece band Kukangendai of Junya Noguchi (guitar/vocals), Keisuke Koyano (bass) and Hideaki Yamada (drums) that creates odd-meter experimental music in live performances by dissecting and then reconstructing rhythms and phrases. They have become the focus of particular attention recently thanks in part to collaborative works with artists in theater, dance and music, etc., such as Chiten's Motoi Miura. In this interview we speak with Junya Noguchi about the band's unique approach to sound-making and the running of their studio and live-performance house named soto that they opened in Kyoto in 2016.

Interviewer: Masashi Nomura [producer / dramaturg]

Kukangendai's sound-making

Kukangendai came together as a band in 2006. What was it that led you to form the band?

We got together in my third year of university. It happened to be the time when I had some free time, and it all began from the vague idea that I would like to put a band together and start making music. When I started thinking about who to choose as members, the first two that came to mind were Keisuke Koyano (bass) and Hideaki Yamada (drums). Both of them were underclassmen of mine in junior high school and high school and we had similar tastes in music, so I asked them if they wanted to form a band with me. None of us had much experience in music, but I didn't think that mattered much for forming a band. Well, looking back now, I think you could attribute it to youthful compulsiveness. It was mostly a matter of momentum that got us started.

In other words, you weren't thinking of becoming professional musicians at the time?

I wasn't thinking at all about making a living through music. There were some around us who were aiming to become professional musicians, but I don't think we were considering that possibility. I was thinking that I would be getting a normal day job and hoping that music could be a serious hobby that I would do while working.

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーマンスアーツの新世界

*1 Atsushi Sasaki

Born in Nagoya in 1964, Atsushi Sasaki is a critic in the fields of film, music, literature and theater, and he is also the head of the recording label HEADZ.

When you formed Kukangendai, was there any particular form of music that you intended to make? Was there any band at the time that you had in mind as reference for the style you wanted?

At the time we formed the band, we were listening mainly to Japanese bands. For example, bands like Fishmans, Newest Model, Yurayura Teikoku, QURULI, and ZAZEN BOYS. After that we had the opportunity to come in contact with a variety of different music, like electronic music, experimental music, hip hop and more, and that gradually broadened our base. At that time we all agreed that the music being promoted by the HEADZ label led by critic Atsushi Sasaki (*1) was interesting. So, we gave Sasaki-san a demo-tape of some of our music and asked him to listen to it, and he said let's release it on the HEADZ label.

You and Koyano-san were students at Waseda University, and Sasaki-san was a lecturer at Waseda at the time.

I went to his lectures. Regardless of the lectures themselves, the music that Sasaki-san played in them and the writings he introduced to us like "ex-music" and "(H)EAR – The Various Phases of Post-silence" were things I learned a lot from. Until then, I had never taken a conceptual approach to music, such as asking what the act of listening actually is, or how do you go beyond existing forms of conventional music. These were books written in very difficult style and with a lot of difficult words, so it was slow reading for me at the time. But, when I read them there were things in them that made sense to me, and I believe it was because they were things that I could relate to from my personal experience. For example, in "ex-music" there is a part where it says that a musical instrument is a form of system, and I remember that I understood that meaning right away.

When you are playing a guitar, you can't depart from the guitar. To a certain degree, an instrument determines the framework of the music you can produce with it. This was something that I had felt strongly when I was composing music, so I could understand it from experience. And that was at a time when I was thinking that I wanted to make music that went off on a different vector from the frameworks or conventions of existing music, so I was very much inspired reading a book by Sasaki-san that introduced all kinds of musicians who had already been doing that.

Are there any musicians you learned about through Sasaki-san that have influenced the style of music you are making now in Kukangendai?

There are many, but in the context of what I have just been talking about, one that really surprised me is Oval (a German techno-music group). It blew me away when I learned that they used a technique called using a "glitch" produced by writing graffiti on the playing side of a CD so that when you played it the writing made skips in the music and then they made music based on samplings of those skip sounds. It is amazing because they were producing something new by using something that was already old, and what's more, it was not an instrument but a medium. Of course, even if you don't know the amazing conceptual background behind the music and its method when you listen to it, you can still feel its fresh innovativeness and the previously unknown quality of the music.

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーマンスアートの新世界

It is hard to define the term new music, but at least I can say that Oval's music was a stimulus that made me want to create music that that is so different from anything I have known before that it surprises even me as a creator.

If I were to describe it in an extreme, I think it could be said that one aspect of Kukangendai's music is that you deliberately choose a three-piece band format to do a sampling of electronic music. Haven't you ever thought in a direction such as adding other instruments and pursuing electronic music that way?

In terms of what I was just talking about earlier, and instrument is something that definitely imposes a firm and unshakeable system, and if you deny that and bring in another instrument, you only submit yourself to yet another system of constraints. And after hearing music like Oval's, I felt even more strongly than before that it would be better to create new music by shifting the existing frameworks in slightly different directions. So, I didn't think about changing instruments or adding new ones.

On the other hand, however, since I was listening to a lot of electronic music at that time, when I tried to bring some of the elements of that music I was listening to then into our band's music, I was also feeling an annoying sense that the results felt strained. Then, one time, partly for the fun of it, the three of us decided to try to make a deliberate attempt to duplicate the kind of "sound jump" that occurs when the needle suddenly skips while plying a record.

It was a time when I had temporarily reached a dead end in terms of direction my composing, so it was partly just done for fun. But, it turned out that it led to an unexpected discovery. From the beginning, I had always like a collage-like concept where a piece would develop through sudden and complete changes in the tune or melody, and doing that meant stringing together one new phase after another. What I found was that, while that kind of "sound jump" had to be done within repetitions of the same phrase, it could be used to achieve the sense of sudden change, or the "collage" feeling that I liked.

At the same time, I realized that a change had occurred in my attitude with regard to performance. How can I describe it? It was a change from playing in irregular meter to a feeling of concentration that enables one to cause phenomena to occur. When you are playing repetitions of a short phrase and you try to make the sound "jump" suddenly to something new, it requires a unique synchronizing of the breath such as I had never experienced before. I felt that, indeed, this change in consciousness regarding my performance method might be the key to breaking away slightly from the existing conventions or frameworks of music. I felt that following this line of thought could lead to some interesting music, without needing to change the instrument make-up of the band, or rather, it would in fact be even better not to change the instruments or make-up of the band.

So, after I found this new method, I began a period when I was experimenting with a variety of things. For example, we said, let's think up a rule that who gradually reduce in stages the number of sounds in the phrases that the guitar, bass and drum were playing. So, we might try making one short phrase and divide it between the three of us. We call this "distribution," and for example, if there were 15 sounds in the phrase, we would assign five sounds each to the three of us and then play them in sequence without breaking the rhythm.

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーマンスアーツの新世界

Next, from our own five sounds, we would each eliminate one sound at random. We call this “opening holes [in the phrase]” or “pulling teeth,” and then simply not play the sound we had each eliminated from our 5-sound portion of the original phrase. This process of mixing in the act of not playing the eliminated sounds then created a unique form of interval. By doing this, while in fact we are just repeating the same phrases [in effect], it doesn't sound like repetition, to the performers or the audience, and we are all surprised, like, “Wow, what just happened?” Doing this was very interesting. What's more, because at first we were not skillful at making the transitions—and maybe we still aren't—it caused the rhythm to get twisted, which in fact made the resulting music become even more interesting.

When you just spoke of “causing phenomena to occur,” that would apply to what happened within the context of the playing of your three band member, but did you also apply that concept to the music [you were creating] as well?

Yes. For example, what I am thinking about when I am creating a piece of music is actually quite simple. When composing, the “riff”—which is said to be a words that originated as an abbreviation of “rhythmic figure” or refrain—in other words a sound pattern, that is what I begin from. I create music by creating a relationship between three different riffs, one each for the guitar, bass and drum. I would say that is the fundamental concept behind what I do when composing.

I believe that most of the pieces on our first album “Kukangendai” (2009) were created with the image of having riffs played by three of us would be colliding with each other or mixing it up with each other in some way. But by the time of our second album “Kukangendai2” (2012), the interest had shifted to having the three of us working together to shape one riff. For that reason, not only with regard to the use of the “sound jump” the “distribution” and the “pulling teeth” methods but also with all aspects, it became performance where all three of us were synchronized. There is repetition, jumps, and along the way some sounds are deleted and some added back in and there is synchronization. In doing this, the figure itself is maintained but an added dynamism is also born. I would say that this is the foundation of Kukangendai's approach to live performance and our compositions today.

By the way, with our second album we recorded the sounds [of the three instruments] separately and reconstructed the pieces through desktop editing, making it a somewhat complex method. It was not because it was music that couldn't be produced without editing but rather an attempt to recreate the pieces we normally perform live in a way that they are reborn. We are frequently told that it sounds like we are “recreating digital music manually,” but that is not what we are actually interested in. Rather, we are doing it with the aim of creating something that becomes different in the process. That is why we tried that [desktop editing] method with our second album. It wasn't to create something that could only be created through editing, but rather it was in order to create some kind of extra twist in the process of recreating the music we are normally doing [in our live performances], and we did it with the principle in mind that the live sound and the recorded sounds are completely different things.

In the course of seeking a creative method that is different from that of existing music, were there any bands that particularly influenced you?

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーマンスアートの新世界

The difficult point in searching for a new method was the presence of the lyrics [song]. When we first started out as a band, it was the song that was the central element we worked from, but in our development since then the song [lyrics] has tended to be relegated to a secondary role. So, we listened to music that had lyrics but didn't use them in the way, or with the sound of conventional songs.

For example, some of the bands were PANICSMILE and 54-71, and also nhmbase (an innovative Japanese pop band that makes abundant use of irregular meter and changes of key), among others. In an interview, a member of nhmbase said that in ordinary pop music, only the vocalists sing, but in their music he wanted to have all of the instruments sing, and that was a statement that I could identify strongly with. I also feel that normally when the song [vocals] comes in, it immediately becomes the commanding element and the guitar, base and drums are relegated to an accompanying role, and that is something I wanted to avoid. I want them all to stand on even footing, you might say.

Other musicians I listened to that I think had a big influence on me were Captain Beefheart (a leading artist on the American psychedelic music scene in the 1960s) and The Shaggs. In both cases they were artists who used strong locals and lyrics in their music, but the instruments didn't sound like merely accompaniment at all. Rather there would be times when it sounded as if the vocals were accompaniment for the instruments. As long as we are playing as a band, I feel that the guitar, the bass, the drums and the vocals should all be ... how should I say this ... they should all be rivals vying on equal footing. That is the kind of music I want to make.

It must be difficult to keep them all vying for prominences as rivals. Because on the listener side as well, people tend to want to hear one vein of unified music in a performance.

That is true. No matter how hard you may try not to listen to the other instruments' sounds around you, you will always hear and be influenced by them, and when you are listening to a recording of the music, we often tend to hear the instruments blending into what sounds like an accompaniment. Music has a very strong tendency to come together as one unified flow of sound. But, we wanted to try to achieve just the opposite. We wondered if an ensemble couldn't take another form. Stated in simple terms, we wanted to create a condition in which the different sounds were competing, or even fighting with each other.

Based on this concept, we even tried a performance where we simultaneously played completely different pieces in a "battle of the bands" type of atmosphere. But in that case there is no connection between the two whatsoever, so it comes down to simply a battle of rivaling for supremacy. As an experiment, I think it turned out to be quite an interesting performance, but what we ended up getting out of it was slightly different from what we were aiming for. However, finding out that two different sounds playing at once can produce something more than the "rivalry" or the "battle" that we have just been mentioning repeatedly, was in fact a big discovery for me.

In the course of these experiments, we were offered the opportunity by the HEADZ label to do some collaborative work with the rapper ECD. We did a live performance in which ECD rapped to a performance of a Kukangendai piece. Our pieces aren't

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーマンスアーツの新世界

intended to be music to rap to, and they aren't created with rap in mind. However, we found that having someone rap to our music did produce a good sense of the kind of rivalry that we are interested in. And, it made me think that in order to get that sense of competing rivals, a shared rhythm might be necessary.

In a case where your aim is “causing phenomena to occur” as you have mentioned, what is the order of the process for composing the sound? Do you start out with causing phenomena in mind and then set preliminary rules that will hopefully cause the phenomena to occur, or do you start by thinking up a phrase and then add changes so that phenomena will occur?

With our second album, I would say that it was mainly starting with rules intended to cause phenomena. I would begin by thinking about a structure and [architectural] design plan for a piece that could cause phenomena to occur and then create a phrase as the material to try with the plan. With our first album, creating the phrase was more a process of musical “composition,” but with the second album, the phrase took a sort of secondary role as a “material” and the main focus was on the design plan as the basis for causing phenomena. And even when I made the phrases as simply a material to try in the plan, I found that they fit into the structural design plan easily. Of course, and additional focus on the material and the phrase would come out later. And, recently, I would say, I have come to be less interested in the theoretical method and I find I am returning to a stronger interest in the phrases themselves. I guess you could say that this is a period of transition for me.

By the way, with regard to the meaning of this word “phenomena” that we have been using, I think the origin of this concept is actually rather orthodox. It is connected to the band as a musical form; for example, it is the moment when a punk or rock band comes out on stage and start a live performance. The audience is there, there is the stage, and then the band members come out, and they strike the first powerful notes on their instruments and that causes a “wow...!” to run through the audience. It is the kind of phenomenon that happens between the audience and the band at that moment. I think this is an original form of the phenomena I am talking about. My concept takes the experience of that moment and seeks to recreate it in different forms, with a different twist. I think that is what we have done until now, and I think it is what I want to continue doing.

The connection to theater and collaborations with Motoi Miura

Have there been any things other than the music you have mentioned that has influenced the way Kukangendai creates sound?

There is the influence from theater, especially from “multiple simultaneous conversations” (a dramatic method in which two or more different conversations play out in the same place and time on stage). I was very surprised that first time I saw that employed on stage. I thought it was a great effect when I saw different people talking simultaneously about different things and their conversations never linked and just continued with the voices becoming noise that continued until the play moves on to the next scene. Since in a play there is a script and a storyline and characters [roles],

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーミングアーツの新世界

as you listen it is easy to be aware that the different characters bring a different background and orientation to the lines they speak. I am watching a scene in which character A speaks and character B listens. I believe this situation can exist because with words spoken on stage we know that the words are always spoken to a specific listener other than us in the audience.

In the case of music, however, the performers are basically projecting their sound directly to the entire audience, so it is not a case of the kind of relationship that exists between character A and character B in a play; in other words it becomes a case of the music versus the audience. Thus, with music you can't create a situation where the sounds are directed at separate listeners, as happens when two or more conversations between different people are being held on stage. So, I arrived at the idea heading in a direction in which the roles of the three of us in the band would be divided so that our three different instruments would together create one rhythm. But, I still remember that unique feeling I got from hearing those "multiple simultaneous conversations" performed on stage, and it is still a stimulating element, or experience for me.

Also, when I saw Chiten's *Atashi-chan, Yuku-saki wo Itte* (2010) performed at Kichijoji Theater, I thought it was amazing. The visuals were extremely cool, including the video images, with a feeling of numerous elements all rushing together in one powerful flow. To me, it felt like [visual] music.

When Chiten perform, they take the words of the script and break them down into separate and independent sounds. This appears to be a device that is very close to what you are doing in your music when you dislocate rhythms and divide and distribute phrases.

I loved Chiten's unique word delivery. Particularly how the actress Satoko Abe-san delivers her lines in a way that makes it sound like the words create a melody. So, at first I found myself listening to it more like music than as the lines of a play.

When I heard the word *watashi* (me) being dissected into "WA! ...ta .. shi" I couldn't perceive where or to whom that WA! was directed. You could say that it was a "wa" directed at the audience.

I see. That may be why I heard it as musical in nature. But, at the time I was thinking of that separation of the "wa" from the "ta-shi" as simply a way to take the meaning "me" out of it or to make it sound musical. However, later when I began doing collaborative work with Chiten, I changed my thinking about it. I have now become acutely aware of the fact that, on the contrary, in their process they were thinking very sincerely about the meaning of each word and the persons for whom the words were intended. And, in my new understanding, the "persons" in this case is not limited to the other actors/characters in the play but also "the other" in its more abstract sense.

Behind this change was the experience of hearing the play's director, Motoi Miura-san giving directions to the actors the first time the words "Watashi no..." were spoken on stage; I thought he would give instructions about the initial "Wa" syllable like a composer or orchestra director might. But when I sat in on a rehearsal, I found instead that Miura-san would pick up on things like questions about feelings or something that

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーマンスアーツの新世界

*2 Fatzer

This is a music theater production created through a collaborative effort between Chiten and Kukangendai, which contributed the music. Adapted and re-structured by Motoi Miura, the play is based on a fragment of an unfinished play by Brecht that tells the story of a soldier named Fatzer during World War I who deserts and hides out in a cellar with three fellow soldiers, but because of Fatzer's bad influence on the other three soldiers' discipline, they try to kill him. The play met with success due to the clash of the unique vocal delivery of the lines of the Chiten actors and the music of Kukangendai with its intermittent flow of phrases. It premiered in 2013 as a repertory work of Chiten's Underthrow theater space. Based on an unfinished play by B. Brecht / Directed by M. Miura, / Translation by Masayuki Tsuzaki.

<http://chiten.org/archive/archives/70>

he felt uncomfortable about and take it as a point of departure to begin giving orders to the actors like, "Do something about that!" One example was when he was sitting in the audience seats and telling the actor, "Say it more like you want to stab me with the word," or "Say the word "Watashi" like you want to kill the people in the audience with it." That led the actor to put a strong emphasis on the syllable "Wa."

Motoi Miura is a director who is also a member of the audience and a critic, and he tells the actors to stab him with the word "watashi" (me) in a way that makes him lose all hope. He tells them that if they don't they will never be able to speak the word, that the audience doesn't want to gain hope from the word watashi. Seeing scenes like this in their rehearsals, I realized that for it includes Chiten the word audience holds several layers of meaning. And it includes "the other" that is the object of their words.

The audience that they have in mind is a presence made up of people who bring different backgrounds with them when they come to the theater to sit and watch a play. It is a presence that brings with it layers of history, systems, topical elements, experiences and moods. And the director serves as the representative of that audience as he gives directions to the actors. This makes me feel how frighteningly profound their work is. And it made me ask myself if we had ever thought that seriously about the audiences of our live performances; or even if performing music can provide a method for such thought. It made me realize the power of theater and also made me think about the limits and nature of music.

However, the experience also made me realize the points we have in common and the many things I can identify with in their creative process. For example, it is normal to examine the words [of a script] carefully in order to recreate the intended sense they are meant to have, but in Chiten's case they also change the very way the words are enunciated and the composition of the script. This made me realize that it is somewhat similar to what I do when I am considering whether to focus on phenomena or phrases, or whether to concentrate on the [architectural] [architectural] or the materials used.

Even if you felt similarities, it still must have been difficult when it came to doing collaborative work together, wasn't it? The first time you worked together with Chiten was with *Fatzer*, an adaptation of fragments of the unfinished play by Brecht (*2).

When we were preparing to work together, Miura-san said something like, "Music usually ends up becoming little more than accompaniment, but that is no good. I want you to perform in parallel with us [on equal footing]. With *Fatzer* we performed our music in the first and last scenes, and it was arranged that whenever our music collided with the actors' lines, the actor would fall down, and I think that in these two scenes we really were performing in parallel. Using this staging device in which the actors would die whenever there was a large sound, it brought added intensity to the intervals when we weren't playing. And it strengthened the realization that the performance is continuing even during the intervals when there is no sound being played. From the theater-makers' side, the intervals of no sound are the places where they can deliver their lines. That is how the lines of the play and the music performance were able to proceed in parallel, I believe.

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーミングアーツの新世界

Like with other Chiten works, the text of *Fatzer* was a re-structured adaptation of the original. So, while Miura-san had his own creative struggle in adapting the written words, how did you create the music for the play? How did you work out the music in a way that fit with the director and the script and the direction of the staging? Please tell us about the collaborative process involved.

I had no initial directions from Miura san, partly because at that stage Miura-san didn't know at all how the production would turn out, so he just asked me to prepare anything I wanted as a first piece for us to work from. To start with, I read all of the original [Brecht] text and used that as a starting point for my composing. Miura-san has the idea that if you he has some music that he thinks is good, he can then work out the staging to fit it. So, when I kept proposing things, he told me, "Just stop it! [That's enough!]" (Laughs) It may be that Miura-san's attitude towards us [musicians] is similar to that of the stage art he uses. As if it is an element of the environment, or as a condition to deal with.

So, how did you compose the music based on your readings of the original texts?

When I am composing pieces, I always leave the vocals for last and add them to the music afterwards to complete the piece, but with *Fatzer*, for which Brecht's words were the only thing I had to work from, so the tree of us in the band talked about it and decided that I might try beginning with the words of the vocal part. So we picked out words that had caught our imagination when we read *Fatzer*, and then I wrote the initial lyrics. And as I was writing I thought it might be interesting if I used the pulling teeth technique that we always use with our music and apply it to the lyrics instead, For example, with the lyrics "*kikoeta oto ga machigatteiru*" (the sound I heard is wrong) and if I pulled out the "ko" in *kikoeta oto* (the sound I heard) it becomes *kieta oto* (the sound that disappeared). Depending on the sounds you pull out, the phrase and the rhythm sound different and the meaning of the lyrics could be expanded in numerous ways, so I started writing with that image.

But taking it to the band that way would prove to be difficult, so I ended up synchronizing the guitar, bass and drum parts all to the same rhythm as the lyrics. For example, when the lyric's rhythm was *ki ko e ta-o to ga*, the bass, drums and guitar would all play a synchronized *ja ja ja jaja ja ja*. So, the words and sounds were all synchronized, and I practiced by humming in that way, but when we got to the stage rehearsals, the words would get in the way, so we ended up performing it without the lyrics. So I had started composing the piece from the words and in the end the words were removed. This was a new creative process that I had never used before.

After that, you did collaborative work with Miura-san on Chiten's *Mystery-Bouffe* (2015) and *Romeo and Juliet* (2017). Were there new developments in your collaborative method with these works?

With *Fatzer*, was saying that at times when the music won out over the acting, the actors would have to dance. When the music's volume got louder, the actors' lines would be lost, so the only way they could deal with that would be through their movement. When the music's time stole the play, the actors had to become dancers. Partly because of that, I feel that special measures had to be taken in the staging in order

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーマンスアートの新世界

for the music and the play to perform in parallel. For Kukangendai it was our first time participating in a theater production, so we were there in the rehearsals not knowing right from left and just doing the best we could.

With *Mystery-Bouffe* on the other hand, we were told that perhaps it would be good if there was time relegated to the music alone. That meant there were scenes when I was singing and scenes where the band's performance was dominant. By our second collaboration both sides had come to know the other's ways of working, which made the creative process easier, but it was difficult to find ways to keep the second production from becoming just a re-boiling of *Fatzer*, and I feel that we struggled to find how the music should be involved.

With our third collaborative production, *Romeo and Juliet*, we made an effort to be more positive about defining the kind of music we wanted to contribute. As with *Fatzer*, we concentrated on finding a way that the acting and music performance could be done together simultaneously. But I feel that there were new developments because we focused on finding a new approach to working the music into the play than the one we used with *Fatzer*.

In specific terms, with *Mystery-Bouffe* we had discovered that the bass and the bass drum could be played at a rather high volume and still leave the actors' lines easy to hear, which is a rather obvious phenomenon when you think about it, and taking advantage of that discovery, I wrote pieces in which the base was playing constantly. In that way, I believe that we progressed from a structured form of parallel performance to a form where our music was effectively being played in parallel the whole time.

Do you get requests from Miura-san concerning the volume or the tone of your music?

The first requests I got was for music with a feeling of ennui or the feeling of an Italian dandy or music with a coarse sound. After that he would say, anything is fine just get it done quickly (laughs). It is rare for him to ask me to make changes to a piece that is already done, but sometimes he asks me to somehow change the scale in one particular part of a piece or to do something to really grab the audience suddenly. At those times I immediately do something in line with what he asks for. A few times I have been asked to change something that wouldn't be easy to change without taking some time to rewrite it, but in most cases it is just things that can be done immediately on the spot. Basically, there are few times when things don't work out easily.

It seems to me that Kukangendai changed a lot after *Fatzer*. I feel that your live performances are more impressive and your activity as a band seemed to take a new direction.

That is definitely true. We especially learned a lot in the area of the relationship with our audience. Chiten places a lot of importance on the audience presence, almost as if they are actually making theater together with their audience. Seeing this has given us a new perspective regarding what you might call interaction with our audience. As for our activities as a band, I believe we were influenced greatly by our work with Chiten. I guess you could say that the experience gave us new courage and confidence. So it was very encouraging for us to see and work with people like Chiten who were performing so confidently and with such a cool presence.

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーマンスアートの新世界

*3 Live collaboration with ECD
Distributed as a donation album
ECD+Kukangendai *Live at Waseda 2010*
<https://kukangendai.bandcamp.com/>

Jan. 2017 at Soto
Photo: Katayama Tatsuki



In your collaborative work with Chiten, you were working with actors, who are players you had normally associated with before that. How did actors look as performers in your eyes?

I think it was similar to the feeling we had when we did collaborations with the rapper ECD. When we first performed with ECD, I thought that would be interesting to do it without any previous rehearsing, so we never did a single rehearsal before the performance. But, when it came time for the sound check, ECD said it would be a good idea to do just a bit of rehearsing, and when we tried we found out that indeed it didn't go well at all. We made mistakes when we were drawn in by the tempo of his words. That showed us that in the actual performance if we didn't concentrate on playing our own music and not let ourselves get caught up in listening to his rap, the performance would be no good. Thanks to that, that performance was really a thrilling experience, and I believe we delivered a very sharp performance. (*3)

That performance still stays with us as an original experience of how interesting it can be when collaborating with someone if you have a positive mutual push and pull relationship going. With *Fatzer* as well, there are times when we find ourselves being overpowered by the performances of the actors to the point where we make mistakes that we would normally never do. So, now I believe that if we are able keep concentrated on our performance at those difficult moments, things will go well.

About soto, the group's studio and live-performance club

Last year, you and your Kukangendai members moved to Kyoto and opened your new studio and live-performance club, soto. Please tell us what your aim was in this move.

When we first started out as a band, our policy was not to think of our activities in music as a vocation, but as time went by we began to become more confident that if we spent more time on our music we could create better works, so we decided to stop being part-time musicians and try to make our living solely through our activities as Kukangendai.

And with this, we got the idea that we wanted to have our own space. If we had our own space we would be able to work on our sound there and we could also use it for events. And the money that came from selling tickets for our live performances would then all be our own income. And if we thought that way, it would encourage us to create music of true value and we would have to play it well too. So, we wanted to have our own space both from the financial benefits and for the purpose of polishing our performance and our music.

In fact, a big motivating factor in this decision was having seen how Chiten used their own space Underthrow for their rehearsals and their performances. I thought it was great that there were artists who had actually taken this step successfully. In the case of musicians, the usual idea is to make your own recording studio, but I really wanted to have a space where we would be able to hold our own performances. Because, I was also interested to find out how the three parties of audience, performers and music could be brought together to make a place for music. In addition, as it is often

Artist Interview

Kukangendai's change of rhythm,
Opening up a new world of performance art

空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーマンスアーツの新世界

said, Kyoto is a compact community, and if you are doing interesting things, people will come to see it, even if your venue is in the less expensive areas on the outskirts of the city. In Tokyo, the only places we could afford to rent would be about an hour by train from the city center, but in Kyoto we thought something better would be possible.

At your soto space you are also organizing live performances for other musicians. What is your managerial concept for soto as a live-performance club?

As a manifestation of Kukangendai's desire to show our basic stance with regard to the creation of music, we don't lease our space out as a performance hall at all, and instead we have Kukangendai or the soto staff organize all of the programs planned and presented at soto. Through our activities at soto, we hope people will experience the possibilities and feel curiosity in new music and things they have never known before.

What kind of musicians do you consider ones that fit in with Kukangendai's basic stance regarding music?

Probably for certain it isn't a question of the form of music or the instruments used, so what is it that strikes us as fitting? That is really a difficult question to answer.

Is it "soto" people (people on the outside) (laughs).

Oh, that may be it. You could say it is people who do music that doesn't fit easily into any established framework or category. And, by the way, the name "soto" came from the title of one of our pieces, but it isn't only that. I think soto is a very interesting word. One dictionary listed its meanings as "outside," "other," "detached" and finally "farther beyond." I thought that was cool, like a poem, and so I decided on it.

Since getting your own space, has there been any change in the way Kukangendai makes music?

With regard to the sound itself as well, having the studio where we practice be the same as the place we perform in certainly makes it a good environment for creative work. And since we can choose the time studio hours with relative freedom, it increases the quality of our practice time. Also, until we got our own space, we basically only performed once a month, but now we are performing six or seven times a month, so I think the level of quality of our performances has gone up with the increased amount of experience and practice.

Also, we are now in a position where we can create works on a larger scale if we want to, so I want to do that now ambitiously. As our first work that can be called a large-scale live performance, we created a long piece titled *Sakka (Abrasion)*. We are now working on our second large-scale piece. And, besides large-scale works, we are thinking about a variety of different kinds of music we should be trying to create now that we have our own space, and we plan to present a variety of different forms of music from now on.

In recent years you have done *Fatzer* tours and Kukangendai tours, and I believe you

Artist Interview

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空間現代の変拍子が拓く
パフォーマンスアーツの新世界

Oct. 2016 at Area Sismica, Italy
Photo: Ariele Monti



have had an increasing number of opportunities to perform overseas. What have you felt about these experiences?

We toured with *Fatzer* to Russia, China and Germany, and last year we toured for the first time as Kukangendai to Italy and Germany. Our experience in Italy was amazing.

In Forli outside of Bologna, a country town with nothing but country homes and farms, there was a performance space staffed by volunteers that was amazing. About twice a month they invite foreign musicians that are touring in the area. The very fact that you are performing there is enough to attract an interested audience, and even for an unknown band like us, a full house of 120 to 130 people gathered to hear our solo performance. It was an at-home type of informal atmosphere, but the audience really listened with concentration, and even though they were hearing Kukangendai's music for the first time, they knew where the highlights were and they applauded when they recognized them. In Japan, people have their own way of appreciating a performance, but the response we got there in Forli surprised us and it really left a big impression on me.

Finally, I would like to ask you about your plans for soto and Kukangendai going forward.

We think of soto and Kukangendai as two separate projects, and we keep a sort of line separating them. But, I believe that the success of soto and the success of Kukangendai have to be mutually connected.

In that sense, as far as soto is concerned we are really still searching. The ideal is to have many people coming there not just in order to hear live performances of the music of musicians they like, but like our experience in Italy, I hope it will become a place that people come to because it is soto and when they come to hear what is being performed they find that it is good music. I won't mind if some people come not because they like Kukangendai but because the things happening at soto are interesting. Although making soto successful due to the type of music, the operating policy and from a business standpoint will be difficult, I believe that in today's society there is a possibility that a space run in this way can be successful. Soto isn't a place where anything can happen. I want to work to start a new trend despite the economic limitations that may be apparent.

As for the future of Kukangendai, I have become very interested in the possibilities that performing overseas can bring. After Italy we also performed in Dusseldorf and Berlin in Germany, I found it very stimulating in a number of ways to perform in different countries. The feeling of the audiences can be completely different and that leads to a change in the qualities of the performance. I felt that having the opportunity to perform that kind of situation will certainly lead to growth in the way we look at our music and that it deepens our sensibilities with regard to music. Going forward, I want to try bringing these kinds of experiences back to soto and see what that feedback leads to.