



Akira Takayama

Port B

<http://portb.net/>

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Artist Interview アーティスト・インタビュー

Akira Takayama, expanding the “architecture of theater” as a new platform in society

演劇的思考で都市を読み解く
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Active initially in theater in Germany, Akira Takayama (b. 1969) returned to Japan and formed the unit Port B in 2002. From 2006, he has been undertaking projects in the urban environment based on theatrical concepts deriving from physically active research. In 2010, Takayama was noted for introducing “The Complete Manual of Evacuation,” a theatrical project that set up “evacuation points” at locations around a city where “evacuees” (project participants) could discover various communities, from religious facilities to collective and shared housing, homeless people, and even so-called “encounter cafés” as places to evacuate from the city they know and construct new relationships. Since then, while bringing together collaborating artists from various genres, Takayama has implemented various projects that show the urban environment from different human perspectives, such as his Referendum project, Tokyo Heterotopia project and Yokohama Commune project, in cities both in Japan and abroad. Calling Peter Brook the reference point his theater vision grew from, Takayama talks in this interview about his ideas and activities up until his most recent project on the theme of refugees, “European Thinkbelt,” presently in progress with Germany’s Mousonturm.

Interviewer: Masashi Nomura [producer / dramaturg]

You began your activities in theater in Germany. Would you begin by telling us about your first encounters with theater and Germany?

The fact is that I grew up in an environment where becoming an athlete was a natural thing to do, and I had an aunt who had been an Olympic volleyball player. So, I was playing baseball from elementary school, and when I got to middle school I naturally began playing volleyball. I wasn’t tall, so my position was setter, and in high school I went to the U.S. as an exchange student to play volleyball. But, while I was playing and trying to find a place for myself among the other players, many of whom were about 2 meters in height, I finally asked myself if I wasn’t being unrealistic to think I could make it as a volleyball player. So, after struggling with the question, I finally gave up the idea of becoming a volleyball player. Giving up sports like that was really a big turning point for me.

I didn’t know what to do next and I had taken a year off from high school, and then it happened that I started going to a preparatory school that a friend of mine was going to, named Keimei Gakuen. It was a preparatory school specializing in Japanese lan-

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(*1): Tsugio Sekiguchi

Scholar of the German language. Born 1894, died 1958. As a scholar Sekiguchi made a great contribution to German studies in Japan, and in addition to teaching at universities and foreign language schools, he was in charge of the German language study program of NHK Radio. A linguistic genius, he studied and became accomplished not only German but English, French, Latin and Greek. From the 1910s, he also became involved in the New Theater Movement as a theater-maker involved in translation, acting and directing.

guage studied that had been founded by a student of the philosopher Noriyuki Makino, and it was there that I began reading Hegel and Marx, not really knowing why. It was then that I learned about the great German-language scholar Tsugio Sekiguchi (*1). Sekiguchi had also been involved in the Tsukiji Small-Theater movement and he had translated numerous plays from German to Japanese.

I went on to college, and there I did things like playing American football, but I found that I really didn't fit in with the physical education types. I loved movies, and I had also gone around seeing my share of 1980s small-theater work by artists like Hideki Noda and Shoji Kokami. Also, due in part to the influence of what I had learned at Keimei Gakuen, I began seriously studying German. Sekiguchi remained a scholar that I admired and so I did research on the Tsukiji Small-Theater movement, and in the process I became more determined to master German. So, I quit Waseda University (Tokyo) and enrolled in the University of Frankfurt [Goethe University Frankfurt]. However, Sekiguchi had been the type of linguistic genius who had memorized all of *Crime and Punishment* when he was in middle school. After about three months in Germany, I realized how difficult a course of study it would be. It was around that time that I saw Peter Brook's production of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* in Stuttgart. I was very moved by that production, and that was what inspired me to go into theater.

What was it that moved you so strongly about Peter Brook's work?

Since I had been doing sports for a long time, I think I was more sensitive than many about the state of my body and its workings. When doing sports there are moments extreme concentration and elation ... during a game you can be cool and detached but extremely concentrated at the same time. And at rare moments, there is the kind of exceptional experience of depersonalization where you feel like you are separate from yourself and watching yourself play. This kind of experience comes after severe training, and there was a rather sad feeling that if I quit sports, I would never experience those moments again in my life. But when I saw Peter Brook's production, I felt something similar to that experience in sport, although it was also different in nature. It made me ask myself, "What is this feeling?" I wasn't immersed in it, and I hadn't forgotten myself, but I felt extremely concentrated, as if everything was present there in that moment. It was a truly wonderful experience.

After that encounter with Brook's, how did you come to be actually involved in theater-making?

After seeing the performance, I was planning to go on to Paris that night, and completely by chance Brook's company was on the same night train as me. When we got to the station in Paris I spoke to them and became acquainted with Yoshi Oida (a Japanese member of Brook's company). After that, I had sent him some of the plays I was writing, and then one time he invited me to come to a workshop that they were holding at Schaubühne. I went, and as I watched I got the presumptuous feeling that I could do this. It turned out that I was given an opportunity to direct a production with a student theater company in Freiburg. It turned out to be a disaster, and I didn't realize just how bad it was until the audience came in on the night of the performance. If there had been a hole that I could crawl into and hide, I would have. It was pure torture.

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Having no previous experience as a director and having to direct in a foreign language must have indeed been a reckless endeavor.

Yes, it was a very painful experience. After that, I continued to have opportunities to direct, but since the actors were all German, it was very difficult to be convincing when I tried to explain things to them, so eventually I adopted a practice of creating my own world beforehand and then just commanding them to do this and do that. I did it that way because it was the only way I could, but every time I got an ulcer.

Those experiences made me feel that I needed to see more theater and study more, so I stopped going to university and spent a whole year watching about 400 stage productions. But, I finally realized that just acquiring technique was not enough. So, taking *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* as a standard for comparison, I began to analyze what was good and what was not in a production. That became an educational experience that got me to think about the fundamentals of acting and the stage space.

I also worked as a director’s assistant at some public theaters in Germany, but at that time I was also asking myself if drama was actually an interesting art form or not.

What were your ideas at the time about drama as a form of artistic expression?

That was a time when I had a number of important experiences. One of them was discovering Walter Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (an autobiographical book linking the author’s childhood memories with those of the society at large). It read like the words of a child lost in the city, and it made me think that I should create a theater work based on it. My encounter with this book was very important for me.

Another was a personal experience I had. In fact, there was a period when I was under a lot of pressure and was suffering from insomnia, and this compounded into a growing sense of persecution complex to the point where I didn’t want to go out in public. I lost my sense of time and I was experiencing auditory and visual hallucinations that threw me into confusion, and it was in that time that I had a sort of spiritual experience while staying in a hotel in Paris. It was at dawn, when I opened the window, as the sun was coming up and I looked outside, everything was in place just as it should be, the window frames, the roofs, everything as it should be. I realized with certainty that I was no longer the center of my own world but a part of the entire world. In terms of time, this experience probably lasted perhaps 15 to 20 minutes. I feel it was something like what I experienced when I first saw that Brook play. I feel it was a kind of spiritual experience. Although it had nothing to do with any god.

I had been fantasizing, and trying to translate my life into worlds of the stage or works of [dramatic] art, but from that moment I realized that I didn’t need to “create” things, I only needed to remove the veils from things so that things could exist as the things they are. That was a very big discovery for me.

Rather than trying to express something, you let things be as they should be....

Yes. With that discovery, I was able to recover my sanity, and then I wrote the work *House of Education #20* (Japanese title *Kyoiku no Ie Dai 20 Go*). It was a grand-scale play and treatise on theater that brought together all that I had learned in five years of serious study of theater in Germany.

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After that, you returned to Japan in 1997.

I had to earn a living, so I got a job at a factory. It was a job to complete with morning group exercises before the start of work in typical Japanese style. It was difficult at first, but it couldn't be helped, and gradually I began losing the feeling that I had to be doing theater. Then one day after about three years, the thought came to me that although I had worked hard to learn lots about the methods for making good plays, in fact it had all begun from my having seen a play directed by Peter Brook. Then I realized anew that I had in fact been a member of the audience in the beginning. It is a ridiculously simple realization, but it was a powerful realization for me.

With that realization, I quit my job at the factory the same day. I thought, if I throw out all the knowledge and techniques I had learned and started anew as "a body in the audience," maybe I could make some interesting theater. And from there, when I looked back at my experience that day in Paris and my encounter with the book *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, I realized with certainty that I had been taking in the world as a member of the audience. With that, I knew clearly where I stood, and at last that gave me a single stance with regard to theater from which I was ready to begin to make my own works.

Then in 2002, you formed the unit Port B. What kinds of members did it consist of?

I began doing workshops, using *House of Education #20* as the working base. At first there were 30 to 40 people attending the workshops, but as we continued the studio work without doing any performance, the number began to decrease until there were just four people left, a singer, a video artist, a musician and a dancer. I thought it was important that I be there as a recipient, and I told them that an actor should be like a receptacle and asked them to act with passive receptiveness. When they took that stance, it was magical to see how something [new] would come out.

What influenced me when I was thinking about this "recipient" concept was the theoretical part of Brecht's "educational theater." Brecht's educational theater was a practice in which Brecht would go to factories or schools and have the workers take turns performing roles in a play and creating plays by bringing in members of the audience to perform roles. And in the course of this creative process he would have everyone involved learn about "how to receive the world." I believe that in these educational theater efforts Brecht was making a kind of model for a passive/receptive form of creativity.

If this was the case, I thought wouldn't it be possible for PORT B to create "recipient" centric stages that gave visual form to the recipient. On stage are people like singers and dancers, and in line with the "ready-made" concept popular at the time, we also asked people like actual university professors and priests to join in our performances as well.

Then in October of 2003 at the Brecht Theater Festival at Theater X (Tokyo) you presented Port B's *One Hour and 20 Minutes at the Brecht Theater Festival*. What was the response to the performance?

It wasn't good at all. After coming back to Japan and working hard for three years [in a factory] and then another two years of creative trial and error and using all of the

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(*2): Hans-Thies Lehmann

German theater scholar. Born 1944. From 1981 – 1987 he studied at the University of Giessen and taught at Frankfurt's Goethe University from 1988 – 2010. In 1999 he published the book *Postdramatisches Theater*, a theoretical study of the new trends in theater after the 1960s which has had a major influence on performing arts worldwide.

(*3): René Pollesch

German playwright and director. Born 1962. Studied Applied Theatre Studies at the University of Giessen and from the 1990s become a leader of the post-drama movement, presenting productions at theaters around the German-speaking countries. He won the Mülheimer Dramatikerpreis in 2001. From 2001 – 2007 he served as artistic director of the Prater small space at the Berliner Volksbühne. In 2002 Pollesch was voted the best German dramatist in a critics' survey by “Theater heute” magazine for his “Prater Trilogy.” He has presented *Cinecittà Aperta-Ruhr Trilogy, Part 2* at Festival/Tokyo in Japan (2011) and *tpt “Tell Everyone! That Soylent Green is Human Flesh”* using Japanese actors (2006).

(*4): Rimini Protokoll

A three-person performance unit formed by Stefan Kaegi, Helgard Haug and Daniel Wetzel in Frankfurt in 2000. They have won international acclaim for their “documentary theater” that brings to the stage non-theater people who have knowledge, experience or professional affiliation in a particular chosen subject in order to present questions connected to real-world issues, and conducting projects in public spaces using a variety of media. In Japan, they performed *Mnemopark* (2008), *Karl Marx – Das Kapital, Band 1* (2009), *Cargo Tokyo-Yokohama* (2009) and *100% Tokyo* (2013).

(*5): “One Way Street” (2006)

Taking the Sugamo Jizodori shopping street as its setting, this was Port B's first “tour performance” work. As they walk the street, each participant (audience) listened to an audio tape of sounds from the street recorded 500 times. While proceeding along the street following instructions given at several points, they experience the visual and mental sensations of seeing while being seen.

money I had saved in that first Port B production, I couldn't help but feel depressed. But there were also a few people who gave me supportive responses, and one of them was the author of *Postdramatisches Theater* (Postdramatic Theater), Dr. Hans-Thies Lehmann (*2). I asked him to watch a video of the performance and he said afterwards he reassured me with words, “Perfect. Now all you need is patience, so keep going like this.” If it weren't for those words. I might never have recovered from that blow.

After that, I was invited to an international forum in Berlin, and when I introduced this work everyone was surprised that people in such a faraway place as Japan were thinking about things like this. Then I was introduced to René Pollesch (*3) and Rimini Protokoll (*4). Pollesch was already well known, but Rimini was only just beginning to appear in theater festivals at the time. We encouraged each other. And we are still friends today.

After One Hour and 20 Minutes at the Brecht Theater Festival, you presented Museum Zero Hour (2004) and The Horatian (2005), after which you virtually stopped making works for the theater stage. Since then you have turned to “tour performance” works and site-specific projects in the urban environment. Why is this?

It's because, when I thought about what I could do with my own body's sensibilities, my own physicality, I thought that actors might not be necessary at all. And I thought that a stage may not be necessary, and couldn't the act of going out into the city and feeling things with my body, seeing things and hearing things itself be theater. For example, I thought about how I could share with others the feelings I get when I am walking in the city. That was the question that led me to create the “One Way Street” (*5) tour performance as a form of street theater. This was the work for which I used the term “tour performance” for the first time.

Recently, tour performance has become recognized as a particular methodology in itself, and without any specific relationship to your work, the term is being used for audience participation projects or as a general term for projects that take place not in the theater but out in urban spaces.

With my tour performance method, I wanted to employ a change of perspective to show that the structure and relationships of the things we see or are seen in theater are also occurring in intricately intertwined forms in the urban environment. Where I fear that there is misunderstanding is that some may think that I didn't like the structure or the “architecture” of theater, or that what I was doing was no longer theater. It is not that I negated or rejected the structure of theater, but rather that I was thinking of it from the perspective of a member of the audience.

So, it is not so much a question of what kind of world you want to present as what kind of world you want to receive or the sensitivities or way of thinking as a “recipient” in the position of the audience, isn't it?

That's right. The word “theatron” that goes back to ancient Greece refers to things that happen in the audience seating area, and the actions of the audience. The people think about a variety of things in daily life, then they gather at the theater, sit

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(*6): “Tokyo / Olympics” (2007)

With the cooperation of the regularly running
“Hato Bus” bus tour company, the tour perfor-
mance visited sites around the city related to
the 1964 Tokyo Olympics to explore met-
ropolitan Tokyo as a city where a variety of
“competitions” are held and our lives there as
the “we” (receptive audience).

(*7): “Sunshine 62” (2008)

In the process of rounding a number of
checkpoints with views of Sunshine 60, the
commercial skyscraper built on the land
where the old Sugamo Prison had stood that
now stands as a landmark of the Ikebukuro
district of Tokyo, this tour performance work
traces the history of postwar Tokyo and its
memories. The participants tour in teams of
five in accordance with their given roles and
the instructions in the tour’s instruction book-
let to perform a number of tasks and engage
in discussions about given themes.

(*8): “Complete Manual of Evacuation (Tokyo
Version)”

Based on the theme of “evacuating from
Tokyo time,” this project sought to fabricate
new relationships between individuals and
the city of Tokyo. “Evacuation sites” were set
up at places near the 29 stations of the Ya-
manote train line that circles the city center.
Participants (the audience) first accessed
the Complete Manual of Evacuation website
and visited the “evacuation sites” set up in
religious facilities, shared housing facilities,
facilities for the homeless, etc., near the sta-
tion designated on the website to visit. There
they met and spent time with people from
various Tokyo communities.

in the audience seating and as they watch the play they reorganize their thoughts in their minds. The wonderful thing that happened in ancient Greece was that the stage was quite small and the audience seating area quite large, and more than anything, beyond the stage you could see the town. The audience area was called the theatron and a culture existed in which the stage functioned as a platform (medium) for the play that was there to induce observation, listening, thought and discussion. I thought that no matter how small the stage might be, for example even if it were exchanged for the iPhone, it could be considered a theater if it could be used to cause people to think about something on the other side, such as the town (community), the society or people’s lives.

You want to cause questioning about the “stage” as being the equivalent of “theater,” do you?

Yes. I know that fact all too well, because I, too, was caught in the trap of equating theater with the stage for so long. A work of fine art like a painting doesn’t need to be understood at the time it is painted, because it may still be discovered and its secret understood after being preserved in a museum for 100 years. It is not the same with theater. What you may feel or what you are provoked to think about at that moment when you see a play is, rather, more important than the play itself. So, you might say that it was in order to think about theater as that kind of mechanism that I left the theater and went out on the streets (laughs).

After that, you presented two more tour performance works in “Tokyo/Olympics” (*6) and “Sunshine 62” (*7). What were your aims in these two works?

“One Way Street” had been designed for individuals to experience by themselves, so I was thinking what it would be like if it was something to be experienced by a group. A [theater] audience is a group, isn’t it? When there are people sitting all around you there are times when it can make the experience much more intense than experiencing it alone, and there are other times when the surrounding audience’s presence creates nothing but the equivalent of distracting noise. So, I asked myself how the “we” (an audience) can come together as one, or how it can be divided into individuals. As long as I am doing work as theater, I thought that I should attempt to find answers for these questions. Working with the help of a tour bus company, the work I created to examine how a group (audience) would come together or divide into individuals during a bus tour was “Tokyo/Olympics.”

It seems to me that the work “The Complete Manual of Evacuation - Tokyo” (*8) you performed in 2010 at Festival/ Tokyo represents an important turning point in your activities up until then. One reason is that it deals with the themes of “evacuation” and “refugees.” Because the following year brought the disastrous Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami and the Fukushima 1st Nuclear Reactor accident, and because refugees have become such a crucial problem in Europe recently, your focus on these two themes can also be seen as very apt and timely premonition of impending problems society would have to deal with. Another reason that I feel that project stood as an important turning point was its structure as a project. In your project, the audience participated by accessing the internet to find the “evacuation sites” you had

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(*9): "Compartment City Tokyo"

This was a project that premiered at Festival/Tokyo 2009 Autumn. In Ikebukuro's West Exit Park a temporary 24-hour private-cubicle video arcade was set up. Based on a television documentary model conceived by Shuji Terayama in the 1960s, passers-by in the park, foreigners and homeless were interviewed, with each person being asked the same questions and DVDs were made of the interview videos and lined up on shelves in the arcade for visitors (audience) to view. In addition, an "Evacuation drill" was performed in which participants (audience) went from the video arcade to a "encounter café" set up in a multiple-tenant building. There, the participants had a 10-minute talk with the person of their choice during which they asked the same questions as on the interview videos. In 2010, a "Compartment City Kyoto" (KYOTO EXPERIMENT), and in 2011 a "Compartment City Vienna" were created.

prepared and then visited them using the Yamanote train line that runs around the city center in a circular route. For this reason, none of the people in the participating audience will have the same experience. Would you tell us how you came to create such a project?

In 2009, when I presented the work "Compartment City – Tokyo" (*9), as part of it we created an "evacuation drill" for people to participate in as an option. In fact, at that time I already had the idea of expanding the evacuation concept to cover the entire Yamanote Line circle of the city of Tokyo. The Yamanote Line is like a clock, because one train completes its circle of the city of Tokyo in one hour, and it constitutes an important public transportation component of the city's infrastructure. I thought it would stand as a work if I created an evacuation site at each of the 29 stations on the Yamanote Line. But, if I did that, it would naturally be so expansive that it would go completely beyond our control. If that was the case, I decided to create it like architecture (a structure). It seemed to me that seeing the [theater] director as an architect was an interesting concept that didn't exist before, and I had the intuitive feeling that creating such "architecture" would be a valid concept for a project conducted in a city.

With theater performances, normally the time of the opening and closing of the theater for performances is set and the time inside is managed precisely, but in the case of these works of yours, since the entry platform is the internet, you leave the motives and movements of the audience are left up to them to a certain degree.

In theater, the time is designed to accommodate a performance of one to two hours, or in some cases several hours, but an architect plans for the changes in the physical experience that will occur with the structure over a longer span of time. These include how the building will feel to live in and how the use of it will affect the body. So, I wanted to try creating a time frame from an architectural approach that involves designs to fit the needs of the users and their physical sensibilities, much like the things people experience when they enter an architectural space like a building.

At the time, I was doing some concentrated study by reading the books of architects like Arata Isozaki and Rem Koolhaas, and I felt as I read that these were people who thought in a very theatrical way. I found their way of thinking to be more theatrical than what normally was applied in a play, and it made me fear that theater had fallen behind compared to thinks like these. What's more, for better or worse, these architects are actually intervening in urban spaces and influencing many people with their numerous projects. Despite the fact that both theater buildings and theater performances are no longer considered relevant in the lives of a growing number of people, theater-makers are still too content to work in the conventional ways. I was thinking desperately about what to do, knowing that we are in a situation today where theater-makers can no longer rest on their past achievements.

I thought about how theater could be connected to other realms, and the conclusion I reached was to not try to bring things into stage productions and arrange them with theatrical methods but, rather, I felt it would be important to use other genres to help re-mix the way theater change to become more relevant. That is why I continued to work outside the theater, and I haven't changed that approach to this day.

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(*10): "Complete Manual of Evacuation (Frankfurt Version)"

This project was performed by Port B for the season opening at the Mousonturm theater in September of 2014. In collaboration with 15 artist groups, 40 "evacuation sites" were set up around the city and neighboring towns, and after downloading the map from the project's website, participants used the trains and other public transportation to visit the sites. The project was nominated for the "2014 Most Important Works in the German-language Countries" of the theater critical website *Nachtkritik*, public voting rendered it 8th place.

(*11): "Referendum Project"

After the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami and Fukushima 1st Nuclear Reactor Accident, this project sought to answer questions about "The voice of 'we' (the audience)." An archive of tapes of interviews of middle school students from the Tokyo and Fukushima areas was set up in a modified refrigerator truck for visitors (audience) to view, while also filling out questionnaires with the same questions as the interviews. At the project's premiere at Festival/Tokyo 2011, the truck toured Tokyo, Yokohama and Fukushima and talk events were held with various academics, artists and poets. In 2012, the project went to the Tohoku region of disaster-struck East Japan, and in 2014 to Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Saitama, where more interviews were made with middle school students to add to the archive, and video installations based on the project were also set up in Mito, Japan, Vienna and Berlin.

You took the concept of this work and took it to Germany in 2014 as "The Complete Manual of Evacuation (Frankfurt Version)" (*10)?

When this work was acted out in the Tokyo version, the current artistic director of Frankfurt's Mousonturm, Matthias Pees, came to see it. At the time he was the chief dramaturge at the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) where Stefanie Carp was artistic director. Later, when Matthias became artistic director at Mousonturm, I heard that he wanted to include "The Complete Manual of Evacuation" in a contest they were planning.

Part of the concept of "The Complete Manual of Evacuation (Tokyo Version)" was to "evacuate (escape from) Tokyo-type time." In the Frankfurt version what was it attempting to evacuate from?

In Frankfurt it was manifested in a completely different way from Tokyo, but in Frankfurt there are also people who want to "evacuate" from Frankfurt-type time. Many of them are the homeless, immigrants and refugees. So, I believe that even though its manifestation was different, I believe that the "evacuation" concept was still relevant.

However, in the case of Europe there are its distinct set of social problems and many in the audiences tend to find what approach a particular artist takes with regard to a particular problem and then deal with it, or dismiss it in their heads on an intellectual level. They don't go to the point of actually trying to experience it, even though they would probably find the experience different from what they expect it to be. In my works, I try to take a different approach, and I thought it would make things difficult as a result. In Japan, theater is a subculture to begin with, so people tend to approach participation from a more relaxed standpoint that makes participation easier.

A few months after your "The Complete Manual of Evacuation (Tokyo Version)" we had the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami and the Fukushima 1st Nuclear Reactor accident. At the following year's Festival/Tokyo you presented your "Referendum Project" (*11). Just after the Earthquake and Tsunami, I believe you were questioning whether it is better to be an activist or an artist?

After the Earthquake and Tsunami, like so many people I was feeling so painfully helpless, so I thought I might be able to do more for society as an activist than as an artist, and in fact I did start doing such activities. But, at the same time I felt reluctant about doing so. In Lehmann's *Erschütterte Ordnung – Das Modell Antigone* (The Antigone Model), he writes that the limiting boundary of politics is time. Politics can control the living but not the dead or the new lives yet to be born. These words struck me with great meaningful and significance.

An activist approach thus eliminates the dead and those yet to be born from the recipient "we" that constitute the audience I value. I also thought that, conversely, it forcibly draws the people that should be free from politics into the politics of the present. So, I stopped being an activist and decided that if I was going to do theater, it is better for me to separate myself from actual politics and, rather, I came to feel that I should turn my ears toward the people in the world who are in danger of being alienated from the present. That, I felt, was truer to the nature of theater, and I feel that if theater is to have political influence, it should be performed in places out of the reach of political

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(*12): “Tokyo Heterotopia”

Focused on the theme of alien or foreign communities in Tokyo, this was a project in which participants visited places like religious facilities, monuments and remains of a refugee detention center and ethnic restaurants to learn about the history and present of Tokyo and Asia. At each of the sites, participants could listen to radio broadcasts of stories written by poets and novelist inspired by the respective sites. After being performed at Festival Tokyo 2013, a Tokyo Heterotopia iPhone app was released in 2015 and new sites will be added by 2020.

Based on Tokyo Heterotopia, a “Taipei Heterotopia” was completed in 2016 based on research in Taipei, and a project is also in progress in Athens (opening in May, 2017).

(*13): “Yokohama Commune”

Based on research concerning the Asian communities in Yokohama, videos were produced on the subjects of the Japanese spoken by the city’s Indochina refugees and Japan. A live installation was implemented in which residents of the Kotobukicho district of Yokohama where there are numerous public lodging houses for day laborers and refugees from Indochina conduct improvisational Japanese classes with the former acting as teachers and the latter as students and using as the “textbook” a Japanese translation of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, in a work that re-examines Japan and the Japanese language. It was on the program of the Yokohama Triennale in 2014.

(*14): Akita Kokugo Denshujo (Akita Japanese Language Training School)

Focusing on the past and present of Japanese language education that exists in a jumble of standard Japanese and regional dialects, this project was conducted through a tie-up with schools and the cooperation of television and radio stations. “Japanese Language Training School” were schools established in Taiwan when it was a Japanese colony at the end of the 19th century.

(*15): “Oita Media Collegio”

Japan’s first “Collegio” (Christian Seminary) was established in today’s Oita Prefecture back in the 16th century and served as a place where various aspects of Western culture and academic sciences were taught. Focusing on this aspect of Oita’s history, this project was conducted with the cooperation of the Oita Godo Newspaper and other media, including TV, radio and websites.

power, or that theater’s success depends on our ability to open up bypasses to get around politics. It is not that I negate efforts to change the present through activism, by that I personally have chosen go forward as an artist, not as an activist.

Listening to what you have just said, I understand well the reason that you changed the direction of your focus to refugees and immigrants in your following two works, “Tokyo Heterotopia” (*12) and “Yokohama Commune” (*13). It was a process of bringing such people who have fallen through the net of what are considered “Japanese” from a political standpoint back into the greater “we,” or going to the places where they gather, wasn’t it?

It is a serious situation having these people whose voices are not heard as being part of the voice of the Japanese population, but in fact they are a part of the “we” that make up this country. Even if they apply, they can’t get official sanction as refugees, so there are many people existing in a suspended state as non-citizens. As people, I think they constitute a heterotopia.

Whereas utopia is a non-existent world, a heterotopia is described as a place or a group within society that actually exists and can be experienced even though it is undeniably different from the rest. It is this “undeniably different” that is the problem, and in his theory Michel Foucault describes the heterotopia using the metaphor of a mirror. A mirror is something that reflects images, but the image in the mirror does not actually exist, so the world beyond that is reflected in the mirror is utopia, he explains. But, in that utopia the background behind your image is also reflected. However, it is a fact that your own image and the background behind you are things that you can’t normally see, aren’t they. But this foreign object that is the mirror that shows you these images is something that actually exists. That is the equivalent of a heterotopia in Foucault’s definition.

With their focus on heterotopia and people who are actually part of the greater “we” but are not included due to laws that make them aliens, I wanted to create “Tokyo Heterotopia” and “Yokohama Commune” to show that this is in fact still where we are as a society by designing them with devices that show the state we are in along with reflections of the background behind us. By doing this on the metropolitan level to show that this is actually the kind of cities Tokyo and Yokohama are, I think we found that what we really is our own backs.

On the other hand, when you did the projects like “Akita Kokugo Denshujo” (*14) and “Oita Media Collegio” (*15) that were focused not on big metropolitan areas like Tokyo and Yokohama but on smaller regional cities, you focused on the media, such as the local newspapers and TV stations. What was the idea behind this approach?

It was for smaller regional cities that I first conceived the idea of “media performance.” When I thought about what could serve as a platform for a new temporary virtual community to replace the existing theaters, I decided it was probably the media. With the cities so inflated and spread out, it is impossible to gather everything and everyone into a single city square. We can’t gather everyone in one place to see and hear and talk about the same things like they did in ancient Greece, so I thought that it could be possible to use TV or the newspapers or the radio to create one [new] layer in the city.

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For "Oita Media Collegio" our collaborator was the Oita Godo Newspaper, which has an 80% share of newspaper readers in Oita Prefecture. In a regional city like Oita which still has such media, I thought that if we could use the power of that media it would be possible to establish a common platform, like creating a community. And with it, we were able to initiate a media performance in which we decided the topics of research and then worked together with the community to find interesting things in Oita and then revive them for everyone.

This year, you presented at Kanagawa Arts Theatre (KAAT) a theater work for the stage for the first time in quite a while. After your having done projects in various sites in urban environments for ten years, I was surprised to find you doing a work for the theater again. Would you tell us about your aim in returning to the theater at this point in time?

Doesn't it seem like all of the communities that form in a natural spontaneous way today are pretty much the same in nature? Even the ones that form when people say "Oppose Trump!" might be quite similar. If we don't do something about theater as well, it will surely become the scene of the same kind of homogeneous groups. I want to be there in a subjective capacity. Rather than pretending to be creating spontaneous communities, isn't there indeed a possibility of artificially creating a place that gathers a variety of different kinds of people with the small world that theater makes? That is my aim in returning to the theater again.

With "Yokohama Commune" we scouted out people who were residents of the city's Kotobukicho district and then refugees from Southeast Asia and we made a place for them to meet. I took a positive attitude to this as part of the potential of Yokohama. A theater can be a place where one sort of community can be created ... a model for a community where a variety of different people can gather. With this in mind, I am now asking how authority can be used in the theater. In other words, by controlling who is rejected and who is allowed in and personally taking on the burden of the cruelty and brutality of that use of authority, I want to create a virtual community in the theater.

I can see your point that when left to natural trends, if you could see the actual contents of the community that forms at a theater, it would probably look like a group that reads the same magazine published specifically for and by a particular group of fans.

I believe this is related to a fundamental question about theater: should it be connected to the community at large (society), or disconnected from it? If you ask me where I stand on this question, I would say that until now I had wanted to work on the side that was connected, and I was seen as an artist that was directly connected to society. But, I decided to cut that connection once and return to the theater. In that theater, as a place that is once cut the relationship with society at large, I want to work in the direction of artificially creating a pseudo community. My thinking right now is that it might be best to make this the model for my activities and then reverse the usual approach by asking society, what it thinks of the community we create there.

I have decided that I want to take on (accept) for a while a form of stage performance and theater orientation that has a full set of three normally negative elements: being

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"virtual," "temporary" and "pseudo." In this model, the people who come to see the [performance] devices I create there and then spread what they see out into the city and the society constitute my audience. It may be my hope to see what changes in their actions there may be for the people who come to the world I create in the theater and receive something and then return to the real world outside. Theaters are going to begin to act like community centers, I feel. There are already some community centers that are fulfilling the role theaters were originally meant to perform even better than the theaters, and this is a fact that we in theater must consider very seriously. We have to think about how to create the kind of architecture [for theater] that will gather people and play out [relevant] conditions.

Why did you choose Wagner [for your return to theater performance]? And how do you use Wagner?

Wagner was an artist who created a modern theater model that draws the entire audience 100% into the time and space when a world is created for them on stage [through the music and performance]. But, our contemporary world is no longer such an era. That is why I decided to try to use Wagner to create places (spaces) where people could experience a different quality of time.

Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is an opera of singing matches, and when you ask who is doing singing matches in the cities today more than anyone, the answer is rappers. Several rappers get together and do improvisational rap cyphers (freestyle rap battles). But they never come to the theater. Perhaps it would be possible to gradually build a relationship with these people and change the theater to a place where they could enjoy gathering, thus creating a pseudo community. I want to create such a place and hold cypher events there, and then present this virtual community all bundled as a Wagner-like *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

Next I would like to ask you about the Mousonturm 3-year project "European Thinkbelt Part 1: McDonald's Radio University." This was the first of three projects that Matthias Pees asked you to do on the refugee issue "even though you are not German or Syrian but a Japanese artist." Would you tell us about the concept and contents of this project?

The plan for this project was based on the British architect Cedric Price's urban development plan that was never realized called Potteries Thinkbelt. Price's plan was to build a university around a railway line that connected a small town that was famous for pottery-making with a large city that was the pottery consuming market and effectively make the railway itself a university. The plan was to expand this on a Pan-European scale that would make the entire railway belt extending from Frankfurt in the north, down through the Balkan route and all the way to Athens a single belt, and have it transformed into a university that could then be called a "thinkbelt."

So, how do you change the Balkan route into a university? There are a lot of McDonald's restaurants along the Balkan route. So my plan was to have these Mac restaurants along the line from Frankfurt to Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade and Athens function like community centers or universities as places where people could think about "what knowledge is in a European context." For example, since there are also

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(*16): Lectures were created on the following
15 subjects:

Accounting, architecture, biology, cooking,
English, international relations, journalism,
literature, media studies, music, philosophy,
risk management, research, sports science,
urban research.

(*17): Keigo Kobayashi

Architect. Associate professor of Waseda
University. After graduating from Waseda
University and Harvard University graduate
school, he worked at the OMA/AMO office
lead by Rem Koolhaas in Rotterdam from
2005 to 2012 and participated in many of
its major projects. He has worked on large-
scale architectural projects in the Middle East
and North Africa and various urban planning
projects. In 2014, he was in charge of display
design for the Japan pavilion of the Venice
Biennale (Architecture).

many Mac restaurants in Frankfurt, we could have them functions as universities and teach classes at them. What's more, the "professors" (instructors) would be 15 immigrants/refugees from places like the Middle East and Africa (*16). In addition, at the Mousonturm theater the architect Keigo Kobayashi (*17) would join in and create an installation in the foyer representing an overall plan for the "European Thinkbelt" and have the theater's café double as a model for a "McDonald's Radio University," thus changing it into a McDonald's that might have been. There you can order [recorded] "lectures" the same way you order food.

In Germany, there are many people who look down on McDonald's restaurants, but for us foreigners and immigrants/refugees they are welcome public spaces, because they have free Wi-Fi, they are cheap and you can spend a lot of time there without being rushed or hassled.

Does connecting McDonald's restaurants across borders mean that McDonalds is a collaborator in the project?

At first, I wasn't expecting any cooperation, but thanks to a number of fortunate developments, we got approval from McDonald's for the project. So, on the contrary, now I hope this will develop into a project that will enable me to make various proposals to McDonald's. Then McDonald's could become an information base, a community center, and a place for classes to be held. I could ask them if, along with their hamburgers, could they sell lecture classes too? Since it is a sensitive project, I'm sure that in Germany it is going to be met with a considerable amount of criticism.

It is sort of a form of self-denial by the theater, isn't it?

In one sense it is denying the role of theater, so it is a bit complex. But, I am also one who understands the struggle of people who are trying to protect their theater. Still, I would like to say in return, aren't we living in an era that has come to the point where some kind of action like this is necessary? If I were a regular director of a theater, I think this is a project that I would not approve of at first glance, but Matthias Pees supported me by saying, "This [project] should definitely be done, no matter what."

What has the response been since the project was launched?

An important strategic point for us was the reception to Kobayashi-san's installation at Mousonturm, and this went well. If this functions well, it should lead to people deciding to actually go to McDonald's. In Europe, the people who go to the theater are large of the intellectual class slightly above the middle class, and they are by no means the type of people who go to McDonald's normally. It was this kind of established "zoning" that exists with theater that I wanted to upset a bit. Whether we can succeed in that has yet to be seen, but I do know that a curator of Germany's Museum of Architecture and the director of the architectural department of the Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste art university were surprised by it, so I believe that we have succeeded in provoking some thought in terms of the architectural concept of the installation.

For this project you worked with the refugee instructors to formulate their lecture

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texts, and I feel the contents were quite weighty. I imagine that your refugee "instructors" were inspired by the themes you suggested to them and thus worked very seriously on them. What do you think this work contributed to the project?

Those lecture texts were the real core of the project, and McDonald's provided the platform that supported them. I learned an incredible amount in the process of working with them to share in their knowledge and experiences in order to make the texts deeper in content. And, their motivation was extremely high. Also, it seems that the process of organizing their experience and knowledge anew into the form of a lecture text proved to be a very valuable opportunity for them, and I think it also became an occasion for them to learn some important German and English that will prove necessary for them to live in Frankfurt going forward. It was indeed a very interesting collaboration.

And I also am very grateful for the great sincerity with which Nomura-san worked with us for his installation.

This work on the project probably resulted in valuable relationships between your refugee "instructors" from the various countries, didn't it?

That was another wonderful result. In fact, that is the most important part, and I now want to think about how to further develop our relationship with them going forward. In Germany they have what are called Volkshochschule, or "people's schools," and for "European Thinkbelt Part II" I am thinking that I want to work on changing the theater to function as a type of Volkshochschule.

From now on, I would like to see these refugee "instructors" do different type of classes from the taped lectures they did for the first part of the project. For example, Hussein from Ghana was a top-class marathon competitor, so he could do workshops for amateur citizen runners, and Rita could do a Syrian cooking class, and Awar could do tours to tell people how to survive in the city using McDonald's. I believe we could offer a variety of interesting classes.

So, you will continue to be working with them through this 3-year project.

Yes. At this point it is still fiction, and an art project, but eventually I would like to see it become a "fabrication that actually bore fruit." Aside from the initial framework of theater or art, there may be people who would come to a workshop simply because the initial lecture was interesting. These refugees have experiences and knowledge that we can't even begin to know, so there is a possibility that they could become real instructors. I would like to see that kind of dramatic reversal of circumstance happen not only in theater but in the real world, the actual society as well.

In other words, in this project you want to propose things not only as an artistic model but also make the project function as a platform for actual training and experimentation, don't you.

This time we created the McDonald's Radio University as a fictional model, but by churning up the realities before us and having them churn us up too, I would like to try to make the results that emerge from that process produce a real function. And even if it doesn't go that far, it will at least serve to overturn ideas about our daily actions,

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such as what it means to learn and to teach, and what significance eating at McDonald's really has.

Meanwhile, I am also thinking about the implications in terms of theater-making. When I finally get to Athens, I want to make a boat and launch it into the Aegean Sea and open a McDonald's Aegean Sea Floating Restaurant. Then, from the Aegean Sea it would sail to the Danube and upriver to Belgrade, Budapest and Vienna, and then sail the canals back to Frankfurt. That is my ultimate vision. Now the borders are closed, but the rivers remain connected. And, in fact, that is what has made Europe until now. Because, all of the important cities are on the banks of rivers.

If the McDonald's boat could carry our refugee instructors back to Frankfurt once and dock in front of the European Central Bank on the banks of the Main River, it would show the refugees and Europe in a different light and change people views, wouldn't it.

We look forward to the future developments in your work. Thank you very much for granting us this interview.