

"Where do we go from here and how do we get there?"

Paris Transatlantic Magazine

June Edition

<http://paristransatlantic.com>

by Jason Kahn

On occasion of the World Expo in Aichi, the Arts Council of Switzerland Pro Helvetia invited Günter Müller and myself to curate a tour of Swiss improvisers in Japan. The touring group consisted of myself on percussion and analogue synthesizer, Günter Müller on ipods and electronics, Tomas Korber on guitar and electronics, Christian Weber on contrabass and Norbert Möslang on cracked everyday electronics. What follows is merely a sketch of our time in Japan. In the space allotted I will only be able to scratch the surface. Over the eight concerts in Tokyo, Yamachugi, Kyoto, Osaka and Nagoya 31 musicians played in a total of 38 sets. And after this tour we had two more concerts in Seoul...but that's another story.

March 1

Got into Tokyo today. The ride into town from Narita one long grey mass of neubauten dank in the persistent rain.

Everyone is worn out. Oddly enough, the grey film outside speeding past my train window rouses me and I shoot some videos. Günter, Thomas and Christian are already ordering rice cakes and coffee.

Every other station we speed through looks familiar to me in a strange and blurry way. Our hotel is near Ikebukuro Station. More déjà vu as I remember having a coffee here two years ago on one of my many aimless walks through Tokyo.

After a short nap, some good food and a beer I'm feeling fit again. Tomorrow is an off day.

March 2

It takes time time to warm up to Tokyo. I'm just starting to feel at home after two days. Spent the morning in Ueno buying kimonos for my daughters. Light drizzle and grey sky. Cold and damp but I'm not minding it.

It's great, the simple pleasures: a bowl of soba, a rice roll with nato, night falling and neons lighting it up. I like that.

Tomorrow is our first concert at Kid Ailack Art Hall.

March 3

Tonight's first set with Norbert and Taku Hannoda on amplified snare drum was a complete disaster. Norbert travels 10,000 kilometers to get stuck in a rehearsal room jam session. It's been a long time since I've heard someone as willfully insensitive as Taku Hannoda. Well, Norbert is afterall veterano. And with stiff upper lip he stuck it out and persevered to the end. Why the audience clapped, I don't know. Out of pity for Taku...appreciation of Norbert's brave resolve?

I was up next with Takefumi Naoshima. It was a set which nicely illustrated the lack in talking about "electronic" or "acoustic" music, as Naoshima played mixing board and I acoustic percussion. Our set was filled with silence and soft sound. Intermittent hiss and scrape comingled with the sound of a fight going on outside, traffic whirring by. The night fading out.

After us were Toshi, Sachiko and Günter. Their set just didn't work for me. Individually I enjoyed what each played, but the three never came together. I felt strange as I couldn't tell what was wrong. Ships passing in the night would have been too complimentary a metaphor for the expiration of their set. After twenty minutes it was over.

We had a full house, the audience seemed pleased. I felt a bit out of sorts.

We went downstairs to the bar and ate some fine food, drank some fine drinks. I felt a bit sad, seeing these people again—people I've been meeting every year or so for the last ten years; each person for a short space of time then...a year or two later the same. It's just isn't right. I want more. But it's impossible, this is the nature of touring.

March 4

Last night at Kid Ailack. Highlight for me was the set with Norbert and Akiyama. It was one of those rare occasions where the music takes off from the git go. As Steve Lacy once said, "raise the bandstand." The music had an incredible energy and lightness. Not once did they veer from the path. They stayed right with it, forty minutes till the end. Akiyama basically demolished a guitar, sawing it, drilling it, hitting it and hammering it. He made a terrible racket. Norbert pretty much just rocked.

I felt totally invigorated after the set. It was if I'd just seen a rocket take off.

The opening set with Christian and Uchihashi on the reprehensible daxophone ultimately left me cold. I had the feeling Uchihashi looked on Christian as less an equal partner than as accompanist. Christian did his best to make the former felt, but was pushed into the role of following Uchihashi, who seems too subsumed in the paradigm of jazz to perceive a contrabass in any other way.

The last set of the night with Tomas, Günter and Tamaru on bass didn't move me, but in a different way. Of course, there were "moments" but not enough to comprise a whole. I just didn't hear any risk or rumble. Just a polite discourse. Perhaps I'm not civilized enough...

In any case, I'm beat. Still down with a cold and too stubborn to stop drinking and staying up till four in the morning. Tomorrow will be hell, I'm sure.

March 5

Today was interminably long. Up at ten with Günter and Norbert and over to Tokyo University for recording with ATAK label instigators Keiichiro Shibuya and his wife Maria. We arrived around noon and finished at six. Then we went to eat "French" food in the faculty canteen and were back by seven for a short set (without Maria and Keiichiro) and thereafter an interminably long and unfocused artists talk, with Günter, Norbert and myself fielding questions until nine-thirty. Afterwards we all went out to eat for a painfully quick meal in Shimokitazawa.

The music was probably OK today but I can't really say at this point. My references have gone awry: too many late nights, too much alcohol. Everyday: wake up and go go

go. It takes its toll. Tomorrow we only have one long train ride before us.

Tokyo is intense. The pace is always fast when I come here. One could argue this is anywhere on tour, but it's not. Berlin's not like this, nor Paris or New York. The pace here gets in your blood and one adjusts unconsciously to the tempo, melding to the floor.

Time to slow down. The only place I have time is on stage; and then it seems time stands still.

March 6

Travel: Tokyo to Yamaguchi

Endless grey sprawl of drab houses, concrete palaces, chrome steel bunkers; every major train station looking the same. Pulling in, pulling out. The lack of urban planning a joke. For the first time, I can say that I'm glad to not be living here.

March 7

Spent the whole day recording in YCAM (Yamaguchi Center for Arts and Media). Mostly recorded in big groups with all five of us, plus several sessions with Katsura Yamauchi on saxophone. Very good music: dense but somehow not heavy. Also some trio sets with Tomas, Christian and Katsura; and with Norbert, Günter and myself. We all went out to eat at a mediocre izakaya afterwards. My stomach is trashed from too much fish, not enough fresh vegetables. And am I jones-ing from not having coffee?

I'm just now feeling the pace of this tour. Tonight I didn't drink any alcohol. Tomorrow will be the same. I'm more than tired; depleted would be a more accurate description. If I can maintain my health and get enough sleep everything will be fine. It's a challenge to maintain one's nerves.

Yamaguchi is dark and grey: a main street strip mall of businessmen's hotels, auto garages, bars and faceless office buildings. A light haze cloaks the town in filmy sunlight. The air is thick and still.

March 10

Time flies by. Three days gone in a blur of grey landscape, train changes, setting up, tearing down, late night meals, torturous mornings.

I'm in Kyoto now. Let's backtrack a bit...

On March 8 we were still in Yamaguchi. I had a bike and rode up and down the main street looking for something to eat. I ended up in a faceless workers cafe. The fried rice was lukewarm and greasy; the soba bland. I normally like this kind of place, but today it just depressed me. Felt a long way from home.

On the way back to YCAM I stopped to buy some fruit. Nearby was a foot bath. I sat down on the cool stones and dipped my feet in the water. Moments later who should walk by but Sachiko and Otomo. ISO were to play tonight before our set.

Our concert that evening went well, if not a bit subdued—which is no wonder, considering the stale atmosphere at YCAM—something between library and public theater. The sound, however, was excellent.

On March 9 we left Yamaguchi for Kyoto. From the moment we arrived it was go go go. We got to Club Metro and had sound check. Then I prepared for recording. Christian

and I stayed behind. We didn't have anything to eat that day but rice cakes from the convenience store above the club.

Club Metro is one of those perennial "black boxes" which I've experienced so often on tour. The sound system, however, was fantastic, as were the staff.

Poor Christian has turned out to be the joker on this tour. He opened the evening with local turntable duo Busratch. Christian tried his darndest, but at best it was a scratchy, hurky jerky affair.

I was up next with Otomo and Norbert. It was an old school noise blow out. We pretty much just exploded. I felt as if I'd plunged into a fast-flowing, muddy river and was being swept along to uncertain calamity ahead. The set ended without disaster and the audience, as to be expected, went crazy. Loud, noisy affairs are often popular in such spaces.

Tomas, Günter and guitarist Yamamoto Seiichi were up next with a set of more controlled music, yielding less to the ambience of the club than our set. The audience of two hundred clapped as well. Everything seemed to be working tonight, especially the alcohol. Tomas was already drunk by the end of my set. Norbert was also into the whisky. I stuck to beer. I sensed some of us wanted a release from the tension borne from the last couple of days at YCAM and of touring in general.

Next set was Otomo and Yamamoto Seiichi, both on guitar. I didn't find this particularly interesting. Probably the only set of the evening which seemed completely out of context.

The Swiss team played the next set. By this time Tomas was completely smashed and the rest a bit more than tipsy (yours truly excepted; manning the decks I had to keep it together...that's life). We turned in a pretty racous set. Definitely rock and roll. The complete opposite of YCAM. Everyone was very pleased. It was, in fact, a really good set.

I suddenly felt so happy and thankful to have the chance of touring with this group. We'd finally hit our stride.

The last set of the night saw everyone on stage. Well, what can you say... big and messy but in the spirit of the evening, which in the end was a very good evening indeed.

Today is March 10 and I've barely recovered from yesterday. Günter, Norbert and I had a recording session with Akifumi Nakajima (aka Aube). The session went well but afterwards, walking with Akifumi to a music shop, I started to feel sad. First because I began to notice Kyoto for the first time since arriving: the temples, the cemeteries, the shrines. So many great things to see and no time to see them. On top of this I felt sad that I wouldn't have the chance to spend more time with Akifumi. I hate this about touring—these fleeting encounters.

March 17

A lot of water under the bridge since Kyoto...a week has gone by and I'm now in Seoul. I've finally had a good night's sleep and feel human again.

After Kyoto we went to Osaka for two nights at the Arts Aporia warehouses. These red brick warehouses were built around the turn of the last century, with the bricks directly imported from Holland. A crazy feat of determination!

Osaka was cold and even snowing at times. Inside the warehouses was even colder.

The first night was all solo sets. All in all there were twelve people on the program. I was really busy with the recording. Christian played first in one of the of the adjoining warehouses. He had an immense space to himself and played a beautiful set. I had a terrible set, due to unpredictable sound and inadequate time for a sound check. Norbert played last and remarkably. Shrouded in complete darkness the blinking lights from his instruments bathed him in a staggering array of spark and strobe. Sonically as well as visually, it was fantastic. He has consistently been my favorite on this tour, whether solo or playing with others.

After was the obligatory meal—this time at a nearby Korean restaurant. I sat with Uchihashi, Ned Rothenberg, Günter, Tomas, Norbert and Ichiraku. I slept terribly that evening—not only from late-night food and drink, but mainly from the fact that my hotel room overlooked a freeway. With the window open the sound level was horrendous and the air toxic; with the window closed I felt claustrophobic. The traveller's life!

The next evening was to be the final event of the Arts Aporia. The Osaka city government had cut their funding. The warehouses will now stand empty until the city comes up with a new concept or tears them down.

We had small groups this evening. For the most part, I really only managed to hear the beginnings and ends of the nine sets. I just felt too saturated with the music—too many concerts, too many people. It was all I could do to hit the start and stop button on the recorder.

I played two sets: one with Tomas and Ezaki Masafumi on trumpet, which was rather restrained; and one with Umeda Tetsuya using self-made instruments. We both played extensively with the room, which had ideal acoustics for what we wanted to do.

Oddly enough, the last set of the evening with Günter and Uchihashi on guitar stood out for me like the proverbial lighthouse in the fog. I say "oddly enough" as this set at first glance seemed like the classic mismatch—when worlds collide. But Günter rose to the occasion, one-upping Uchihashi's exorbitant virtuostic rhetoric with subtlety and content. I'm not sure if Günter enjoyed the set but I was pleasantly surprised, hearing a different side of him.

The evening ended in yet another izakaya, drinking, eating, drinking. Our host and Arts Aporia's sonic arts curator Kojima Takashi got completely piss faced. Maybe this was his way of avoiding the sad realization that his project, at least temporarily, was now over. He can certainly look back on his work with pride.

The next day we played in Nagoya, a comfortable one-hour ride from Osaka. I was dead tired, having stayed up the better part of the evening tearing the synth apart and phoning home.

Club KD was freezing cold, as was Nagoya (it was snowing). This was the typical touring affair: get into town, get picked up, go to the club: see nothing. Nagoya from a car window.

With its wooden walls and rustic decor, Club KD reminded me of ski hut meets wild west saloon. We did a long sound check on the crappy system (worst of the tour so far) and went next door to eat some very spicy noodle soup, which succeeded in bringing me back from the dead.

Well, I managed to play the first set with Norbert, Günter and Lethe. Lethe lives in Nagoya: long black hair, black leather. A kind of archetype here in Japan (Keiji Heino the granddaddy?). He played a rubbish heap of exposed circuits, mixer, the odd

effects pedal. Our set was OK but nothing earth shaking.

Next up were Tomas, Otomo and Christian. A well-wrought but uneventful set. The intermittent rumbling of trains passing directly over the club punctuated their music with earthshaking bass.

The last set of the evening was everyone together, which was rather good, I think. I kinda slept walked through that one. I was tired, cold. I just wanted to go to the hotel and sleep. But no! The Wait descended like a hammer blow. The Wait is when everyone is waiting around to go, half-chatting but with no one actually undertaking any task to make it possible for everyone to leave.

This was one of those clubs where the musicians are given nothing to drink (not to mention eat). And the beers cost seven dollars. After twenty-five years playing music it never ceases to astound me how some club owners just don't get it: hospitality=better music. It's really that simple. When the musicians have to squander their meager fee on over-priced drinks nobody can be happy.

We went to Tokyo the following day for the final concert of the Japanese leg of the tour. We got into town, left our stuff at the hotel and set up at the venue, Space Force in Meguro.

This was the ATAK label event, a night I dreaded. From the very start, planning for this had been plagued with miscommunication. The sound system was good but too loud. And the room too small. With two hundred people the concert was basically sold out, over-full in fact. A line of people stretched down the block waiting to get in.

Christian and Evala on laptop played the first set. Another case of poor Christian getting placed in an unhappy situation. And another case of him having to play the opening set. I often felt on this tour that the concert organizers didn't know what to do with Christian or, rather, his instrument. Much of the focus in many of the places we played was on "electronic music." (whatever that means). And here was Christian with the most acoustic of acoustic instruments: inescapably, unavoidably acoustic. It was as if the organizers just wanted to get it over with, get this "thing" out of the way and move on to the black boxes. And as usual, Christian handled himself admirably in the face of adversity.

The next set was Günter, Taku Unami on laptop and amplified objects, and Maria also on laptop: a rather introverted affair. Maria stood out for me, quietly infusing her sounds into the dense mix. As they say, "well done" but ultimately not very memorable. Tomas and Akiyama played next. This was the sonic onslaught I expected it to be. Tomas did his best to keep up, but it was Akiyama's show. He's not called "Cap" for nothing.

What I like about Akiyama is his desire to just go for it, often working with instrumentation just barely under his control. It seems to me he is as uncertain about what will happen as the audience is. During his sets I often have the sense that Akiyama is constantly discovering. His concerts often have a playful destructiveness about them which reminds me of kids making a big mess in the sandbox.

Sometimes Akiyama gets overwhelmed by the unpredictability of his instruments. And then perhaps the music goes to hell. But in a way, I'd rather see this happen than hear one safe set after another of "good" but ultimately unexciting music. This all makes playing with Akiyama an adventurous, albeit at times, exasperating experience.

My set with Taku Sugimoto on bass guitar and Yuji Takahashi on laptop was anything

but adventurous: completely confounding. Basically, Taku didn't play. I don't know why he bothered to come. I had to think to myself afterwards, what a sad state of affairs it is when such a gifted musician agrees to perform a concert he has absolutely no desire to perform at, and then doesn't even really perform but just sits there with his chin resting on his hand looking down blankly at the table. Some people might call this "performing," but these antics were already long played out by the middle of the last century.

Yuji Takahashi obviously lives on another planet than I do. He basically played samples of electronic percussion and snippets of speech. How exciting! On top of this, he was totally insensitive, during sound check playing so loudly I had to leave the room. He wasn't even making the slightest attempt at hearing what I was doing. I once saw Sunny Murray stand up in the middle of an FMP Festival concert with Alex von Schlippenbach and Gerd Dudek, screaming, "Let me play! I wanna play now!" I about felt like doing the same. And this was just sound check!

The concert wasn't much better. I tried my best, tried to hold things together, impart a semblance of life to a set all but d.o.a. The audience applauded when we were done, but I'm not sure if this was less out of appreciation than relief at its end.

The last set of the night was a blow out with Toshi, Norbert and Keiichiro Shibuya on laptop and synth. They basically just blasted off and went into orbit. There were some great sounds happening—especially from Norbert, but for the most part I was just thinking, "Where do we go from here and how do we get there?" With time, the set's meandering character began to fascinate me—it almost seemed as if there were three separate directions being pursued simultaneously. In this sense, and because of the fantastic sound happening, the music was a partial success for me. When it was over the room roared with applause.

And then that was it: the end of the tour. The Magic String Band came on the PA, people began milling out. I packed up my stuff, said my goodbyes and was gone. Again exhausted and overwhelmed from too much music, too many people, too long a day. I just wanted to be alone, get something to eat and have a beer.

Getting out at the station near our hotel I walked to the closest soba shop. It just seemed so sad in there. What desolation: a couple disheveled salary men slurping away at undoubtedly bland-tasting soba; day-old rice cakes in a smeared glass cabinet at the counter; the staff disinterested and pasty looking.

I walked out of there and went to a small izakaya across the street from my hotel. Here was peace: enka playing softly on the sound system, a smiling old couple running the restaurant. Four other people sat drinking and picking at their meals. Everyone seemed happy and for once I didn't have to sit in the smell of steam and damp linoleum.

I ordered a beer and yaki soba. The beer was good and cold. I started to relax. I'd finally found a pocket of sanity in Tokyo. I ordered some sashimi and sake. I felt like I was celebrating but I didn't know why. Sitting in that restaurant I began to think back to my days in Los Angeles, when I'd come home after a gig and treat myself to a big meal at Suehiro's in Little Tokyo. And here I was again, in a similar place, in a similar mode, light years away in time and place.