Interview with Keiko Uenishi (aka o.blaat)

Miya Masaoka

Miya Masaoka is a third generation Japanese American artist classically trained as a musician and composer. In her compositions and installations, she involves improvisation, interaction, spatialization, sensors, computers, and various media including video and film.[i]

In this interview with fellow Japanese/American sound artist Keiko Uenishi I work outwards from the personal to consider the radical potential of internet-based sound and video improvisation to build community across ethnic and gender lines.

Having just completed an internet web streaming project with the Western Front (http://www.front.bc.ca) in Vancouver and Radiokunst (http://www.radiokunst.net) in Vienna entitled *Chironomy*, I have a particular interest in real time and interactive internet art, a genre which often involves connecting international communities. As such, internet art has the theoretical potential to break down social and cultural borders. While the erasure of gender and ethnic lines has certainly not fulfilled '90's naïve prophecies of a "cyber melting-pot," the potential for inclusivity continues to hover about this genre that melds improvisation, collective decision-making, and a joining of visual elements with sound for a more immersive and integrated improvisational environment. The open nature of this genre can create an unusually inclusive atmosphere among its participants.

While curating the San Francisco Electronic Music Festival, I became aware of Keiko Uenishi (http://obla.at), her sound pieces and her intense involvement with an ongoing real time internet project, Share (http://www.share.dj).

Improvising with Share

It's a Sunday evening in Lower Manhattan, and I'm searching for a bar called Mundial, where I know I will find Keiko Uenishi (aka o.blaat) who is scratching with chalk on a sandwich board the names of the guest performers for Share, a weekly jam session for digital audio and video artists, which is streamed live on the internet and broadcast to the world. (There is also a Montréal-based Share as well as similar communities in Australia and Austria.) O.blaat was born in Japan but has lived in Manhattan for the past sixteen years. Originally a tap dancer, she has been creating music over the past six or seven years. From its beginnings four years ago, she was an early member of Share.

Inside the bar, people are relaxed in lounge chairs and couches at various angles; most have laptops connected to a central mixer. I am surprised by the mix of so much diverse hardware, as I expected everyone to have laptops. There is a woman hanging her head and draping herself over her cello with her hair falling down over the strings, and a rocker-type guitarist with a collection of extremely worn guitar stomp boxes on the floor. There is no cover charge for participating in Share, and I appreciate the mixing of social classes and an acceptance of varied levels of technological geekiness. I notice some people are using commercial software and others have written their own software. (Geoff Matters, one of the founders of Share, has co-written a digital dj mixing software called GDAM.) The range of technological experience and expertise is vast, and newcomers are welcome.

The guest performers are a female vocalist and male laptop artist from Australia running Pro-Tools along with other software on his computer. Within the bar, there are video projections and displays at odd angles; however, the center of attention for the group of people assembled is their own computer screens, where people are social and friendly while "nerding out" and working out ideas on their various software and hardware tools.

After the singer finishes a song, she looks around as if by habit, to see if anybody is applauding their performance, or even looking at them. But in fact people are busy hammering away at their keyboards, or deep in thought and not even looking up at the performers. This is clearly a restructuring of what it means to be a performer. We are creating art in a flexible workshop environment, and leaving the rigid stage/audience paradigm behind. We are all performing and contributing to the immersive environment, and simultaneously

we are all the audience, listening to the group mix to evaluate the current state of group activity, and how to most effectively contribute as an individual.

Share is seemingly casual, yet streams live broadcasts to the world. There is an openness where a diversity of genre and people are unusually welcome. Hip-hop beats can mingle with noise and experimental, jungle with ambient. While the demographic is mostly men, during my visit to Share, women were perhaps one-third of the participants.

In a recent phone conversation with Pamela Z, composer and sound artist, she recounted her experience of Share:

> The first time I went, there was a majority of men, but the featured artists were women. Then later occasions there were more women participating. It (Share) was friendly and inclusive. A lot of the people with laptops were guys, but always there were some women. I was introduced to a lot of women electronic artists there. [. . .] I enjoyed meeting the other artists, [. . .] the low pressure, just joining in and not bringing all the gear and getting to try some new things out. I enjoyed being able to play off of other people. Sometimes it was all electronica and then the soundscape would become more ambient, and I inserted myself into that. The artists there were different from whom I would normally collaborate with, and I enjoyed going into their world. I like the variety of people that show up. I think of Share as the modern day open mic night. I used to attend singer/songwriter open mics with the guitar, and it's a modern day version of that, where people bring their ax, only now it's the powerbook.

> Share is mostly improvisational and predominantly electronic. I bring my powerbook and microphone. It's interesting because everybody is hooked into the mixer, and there are lots of sound sources, and you can't keep track of what is what. Lots of times I don't know who is making what sound. There are many visual monitors and projectors, and displays of video. We are jamming visually and with audio, and there are several people contributing to the soundscape.

Sharing Across Communities

This interview reveals the importance of non-competitive community building to sustain and nurture artists. The stability of an improvisational community like Share gives rise to experimental and creative works, and provides an inclusive environment for a diversity of race, gender, differing artistic processes, identities and social/musical categories. It is also a site where generations mix, as I have witnessed casually.

Share is also creating new opportunities for improvisation in video networking, a process that is gaining momentum. How is improvisation in video similar to or different from audio improvisation? Is dialoguing and improvising in the video format going to have a growing live audience and site for presentation, closer to the musical improvisation model? One video participant at Share said that he found it boring to work solo when creating video work as he had become accustomed to having his work thrown back to him on his computer with the same but slightly transformed material by another video artist. Working collaboratively and improvisationally—whether on the internet or at Share—was his preferred creative process.

By focusing on the experience of one Asian/American artist, I also want to emphasize the importance of personal narrative as a way of highlighting the epistemologies and praxis of artists who self-identify as Asian/American. My own involvement with improvisation within technological environments articulates new possibilities for breaking down entrenched ethnic, gender and artistic barriers, while simultaneously re-affirming individual subjectivity within community. In doing so, I want to challenge existing social hierarchies. As Keiko Uenishi's comments indicate, her work has been influenced by her childhood in Japan and her artistic development in New York, but it is most deeply invested in a politics of innovation and inclusion made possible through improvising in community.

Where were you born?

I was born in Nagoya, Japan, and raised in Osaka. Tokyo to Osaka is three hours and I didn't go to Tokyo often. Osaka was a big city enough for me. I didn't crave to go to Tokyo. I would rather go to the countryside to see the beach or mountains. My mother loved mountains, we went around to Koyasan which is one of the

holy mountains for Buddhism. We went to the Japan Alps in Nagano and we went to Hida in the summer season.

What kind of music and contemporary art were you exposed to back then?

I was listening to so many different kinds of things, some weird music in Kyoto, kids doing weird music. I remember clearly this guy took somebody's watch from the audience; he didn't have any plan. He created a performance set out of someone's watch. It was a salon, in a very fashionable building, a cool bar or café. Sometimes they have a salon style concert, anything goes. He was member of EP 4. And there was punk music, and I liked that too, and my friends were doing some very bizarre girl's choir. They were digging up some really ancient medieval music. Really underground music is what I really liked. My mother loves classical music, and took me to many orchestra concerts, and we also went to see NOH but not much Kabuki.

When did you start creating music?

I didn't start creating music in Japan. I left Japan sixteen years ago. It's been six, seven years that I have been creating music. It took me a long time. I came here in the late 1980's, I saw a lot of stuff, I was totally ignorant, and then I started shifting, expanding, checking more electronic stuff, more underground. Rave and dj culture, I never thought I would relate to that myself. How this music relates to people, it's quite different from concert style music. I was more and more interested in the relationship between the sound and the audience. I thought most music is completely stuck in the concert style and the way concert music is presented. The performer is set over there with the spotlight, and people are supposed to look over there.

Those rave culture people are not approaching it in such a way, especially underground electronic music. They started breaking that rule: sometimes you don't see where the dj's are. They are in the darkness; kids don't care what is going on, they are too busy dancing. It gave me an idea. They [dj's] are not emphasizing themselves, but saying "Ignore me." I started thinking that way, how to be ignored.

What does o.blaat mean?

I started using the name when I started solo, around 1999 or 2000. For me, there was a big problem of presentation as a performer. Typically the focus is on the performer. I tried my best to disappear. Oblaat is used for wrapping around different things, keeping the candy from melting during the summer. It doesn't have flavor; as long as you swallow it, it melts. It is used to make pill holders to contain powder medicine. It exists to disappear. It is just there to wrap around something. It's made out of potato gluten. It's just round and transparent; now there are different flavors like strawberry. This is the same material as a Catholic Church wafer. I have always liked this name, oblaat.

When did you start tap-dancing, and how did you come upon tap-dancing?

I loved Fred Astaire, I saw almost all Fred Astaire's movies, and I wanted to dance myself like that. I started in 1980 and there was a super teacher in Osaka. When I moved to the US I continued and took Broadway dance style, Fred Astaire, and later jazz tap. I really liked learning the skill and the concept of it. Altogether seven years I did tap, and later experimented with modern tap dancer Anita Feldman who has been collaborating with new composer Lois Vierk.

The history of it is so stiff, someone said, "Anita Feldman, she's great, but she's not a real tap dancer." I said why not? He said, "She can't swing." That attitude, I don't like that. It [tap] wasn't something I wanted to pursue. I was thinking about improvisation.

Improvisation in the tap world is extremely outdated. They only speak to the idea of how to divide the bars, how technically skillful they are. Anita divides things in seven and many different ways, but I thought, "this is not breaking any new ground. This is not revolutionary yet." How long ago since John Cage died, and all they care about is fast, fast, fast. And tap dancing is placed in a unique position, it's movement and sound, but tap dancing hasn't made a contribution in the history of movement or sound in the sense of creating new stuff. It's always looking back. "Let's look at the 1920's and the master, and let's look at how this master did it already back then." I was always mesmerized looking at the films and archives. Re-learning is something.

It's almost like learning classical music, and written music. "Let's learn the score and recreate the same thing."

It's one way of being, but there should be another way of being. The people in the classroom are really competing against each other, how this person is faster, that person is faster. It's stupid to compete. So towards the end of tap dancing, I wanted to do something and the turning point was Koosil-Ja Hwang, she used to be known as Kumiko Kimoto, and she changed her name back to her original name. She was born in Japan and only knows how to speak Japanese; she never spoke Korean. She moved [to New York] when she was twenty; she has been doing great work. [In the late 1990's] she was creating this series called Metamorphosis in the East Village and she was into electronic music also. Every month she collected some modern dancers and electronic musicians. She asked every single artist to do something. She said, "Keiko you want to do something?" And she was thinking tap dancing. I wanted to do something—music, but I didn't know exactly how. I thought I wanted to collaborate with Christine Bard [composer/percussionist], since I saw her and Jim Pugliese [percussionist/composer] collaborate together using contact microphones, which I thought was really cool. If I start using contact mics, then I might start doing something that would be cool. So I approached Christine Bard and she said, "great, let's do it." She thought we would be jamming together and I would be just doing tap-dancing and not electronics. But I said, "Christine, I want to do the contact mics too." So she told me how to make the contact mic, by breaking the piezo contact mic from Radio Shack. Should I buy the guitar pedals? I bought guitar pedals and borrowed somebody's mixer. I did not know which one goes where, and why the sound didn't come out of the mixer. But that was the beginning. "This was great," I thought, and much better than just doing tap-dancing.

So I did my first performance like that, and it continued with Christine Bard. We did it together, and eventually I wanted to practice and experiment more. She was a professional musician, but that wasn't a priority for me: I just wanted to play and experiment. I took whatever was coming, and somehow it became my solo career. I started saying "yes" for solo, free performances, it became my solo career for awhile: 1997, 1998, 1999. Around '99 I started making so many contact microphones. I dropped off from the dance world and moved away from [that] way of presentation. The old concept there is still the stage, the audience, and they are aware of how they (musicians) are creating. I really didn't have an interest in that.

> **What are some of your concerns and what is your approach to curating and presenting work?**

I was bored with curating, but successful. I never wanted to curate. These are my two underlying ideas on curating.

1. Experimental music is not difficult, it's fun.
2. I try to mix up the audience situation. I try to avoid staging as much as possible. You can always go to see concerts, so why should I curate a concert like that? I put everybody in different areas from the traditional concert space. I put them everywhere. People have to move around if they want to catch as much as possible. You can't see everything. It's o.k. to miss something. They get relaxed. They use the floor. From that point of view you can start hearing something you have never heard before. Concentration is not that good sometimes. Sometimes the artist is not creating sound itself, but you hear something from outside. If I hear something from the outside, it's also a part of live music. Typically in concert music, people repeat the same composition in the same situation. My preference is to hear something completely different. Environment is really important and affects the performance.

I didn't have any interest in being seen by the audience. I'm good at feet. I can use my feet to trigger the sounds, and my hands are free to do the electronics. I thought, "hey, convenient." But gradually I started realizing as much as I wanted to be disappearing when performing, I'm not thinking about how I'm moving, I'm moving my feet only when I need it for the sound. People thought the set-up was very interesting or peculiar, and would gather around me to see me set-up, and that bothered me. I thought "I need to dump this set-up because it doesn't serve my purpose." I put the contact mics everywhere and started having fun triggering sounds everywhere, and let the audience trigger the sound, rather than me. So I wired the bar electronically, the ice machine, counter, cash register, and I encouraged the people, "ok, this portion of the performance, you make sound." Whatever you do at the bar, is going to be part of the music. So I asked the bar tender to do drink specials, make this drink cheaper, and this bottle was of course wired to make sound. It went well, so people started asking me to put something together. Then I did a ping pong game, and then a big dinner party thing: two hundred people sitting at a table.

Then I got stuck. I had done everything I could with contact microphones, and I needed more of a knowledge base, something else. I needed to pursue a direction, to explore sound-wise, something interactive. Suddenly Harvestworks [the New York audio studio] decided to give me a grant, and I put the money into getting my first laptop. I needed a tutor for Max/MSP so that was the beginning. And in the middle of 2000 I slowly started playing, but wasn't useful until 2001, which was the same year Share was born.

What is Share? How did it start? Did you start it?

No, these guys Barry, GeoffGDAM and Newclueless started it. There was no name at the beginning. "This Linux program guy has this amazing software, maybe contact him," someone said. "Oh, do you want to see what's happening with my software?" And then people came on Sunday to check it out. Geeky kids started coming, and we thought maybe some of us can start making music, not just the sound guys.

We needed some name if we want to promote this idea. The next week I came back and asked, "so you guys made any decision on the name?" They said, "We have a name, Share." "That was it," I said to myself, this was a great concept. This is it!! I'm going to quit curating. We will share everything. We gonna experience, we gonna share music. Then some friends stopped by, and people were asking, "can we use that monitor to show some video stuff?" Then some visual people started coming.

We share software and we have a network base called keyworx. People started throwing ideas around, "what about this, what about that," like a great vacuum that was sucking in people in a relaxed way. There is no strict rule. We are very inclusive; we never know where we are going and we never restrict the content or the way people play. That became the event, being very inclusive. We never know where we are going, or how people will play. This is not a techno party, this is not an experimental party. Some people are bringing in dance floor music, some people are bringing in interactive pieces and sensor-oriented pieces, some people are bringing in things they are curious about but never used before. There are lots of people with varied experience and background.

Everyone can make music and play in public. There is this group of people called "bedroom composers" who have never played in public. We provide the space for them to go. This is content-less, which is what I really like. We have been doing it every single Sunday for four years. And no break!

Even after 9-11 we met. We just gathered the Sunday after the Tuesday that 9-11 happened. It was good to get together and talk about what happened. We just gathered, and made sure we were all still breathing. It was summer, and the space smelled like smoke in the summer. It was weird.

Everybody in Share is very active. A typical frustration (for these kinds of groups) is that everybody wants to play, but no one wants to help. You know the story. The San Francisco Electronic Music Festival that you have done requires a lot of effort from everyone, and that is also different. But usually everybody wants to play but no one wants to do the work. With Share, it is quite the contrary. For example, someone said, "let's buy a website." Someone else volunteered, "I can do a website." We are always asked, so who is Share, how many people are involved?" We can't count, there are so many. But maybe ten, twelve who are working hard, active all the time. So that is what I'm very excited about, more than anything else I do. Share helps us help each other, including myself; we can all grow up. We learn from everything.

One of the suggestions to the Share participants on the website is to come repeatedly to Share in order to "improve one's jamming skills." What does it mean to improve one's "jamming skills?" Can you identify some?

Jamming skill is really improvisation skill. Everybody has to improvise, everybody has to play together. It means listening and asking questions. What makes the group sound interesting for each other? Sometimes they have to learn how to withdraw, to step back. Then if everyone withdraws, they have to step up with their sound.

What is the relationship of visual improvisation to the audio improvisation? What are some of the similarities and differences?

That's very interesting. We had that question on a panel once. They do have a different relationship. Some are using both audio and video, and some are using just video. In some of the collaborations between video artists, some people are using a mixer, some are using two projectors and sitting right next to each other and producing a dialogue. Sometimes they fool around and use the same material and translate, or change, the same material into their own.

How does improvisation play a role in your work?

I am performing not to make statement but I'm improvising with the environment in which I am placed. I am not only playing to myself or fellow musicians but also play to the space and the environmental and surrounding sound, and how the echoing is going. And accordingly I can make decisions on the spot. I like to make decisions on the spot.

This is IT! This is what I like to do.

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[i] For more information about Miya Masaoka see her website at www.miyamasaoka.com.