

Interview with Akita Masami (Merzbow)
Questions by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Ute Meta Bauer
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AM is Akita Masami
UMB is Ute Meta Bauer
HUO is Hans Ulrich Obrist
Translation: Akiko Miyake
Transcription: Carrie Pilto

HUO My first question is about your name, Merzbow, referring to Schwitters, Why did you choose this name for your music activities.

AM In my work, I use materials which I find everywhere and assemble. It seems to me a process similar to Schwitters' work, so I just took the name.

HUO Do you mean you assemble disparate things in your sound pieces or do you also work with found objects or sculptural installations?

AM No, I just work with found sounds, not materials, just noise; I just made very cheap cassette tapes.

HUO When I interviewed Eye Yamatuka recently in Osaka he was referring to your work, to Pan Sonic, to Mika Vainio, to his own work as well – he said this sort of noise music would have origins in Japan from the tradition of Gagaku music. How far do you see your work related to that, and could you talk about traditions of noise music in Japan?

AM I don't think my music is related to any tradition of music in Japan like Gagaku. It is much more related to western influences.

HUO what are your western influences?

AM The seventies, like Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart, King Crimson.

HUO Another question concerns the Japanese context. I wonder from your own position who are the people in Japan you are connected to, you are in a dialogue with, what would be the sort of music context you would work with?

AM Nobody, I think, but I work with people from the west like Masonna, Incapacitants but everybody here is completely different.

HUO from your own work?

AM Yes

HUO How far is Merzbow a group, because you somehow see Merzbow as your own personal project but at the same time you perform with other people. How would you define the boundaries of the group? Where does it begin and end? Is it a one-person kind of enterprise?

AM Basically Merzbow is a solo project, we come together with people only in live performances. I make my music completely alone.

HUO under another name than Merzbow, or also under that name?

AM Sometimes using my single (solo) name.

HUO When you do performances, your name has to be Masami Hakita?

AM No, it's Merzbow. Sometimes I play alone, things that are a bit different from my Merzbow work. In that case I use my own name.

HUO And what is the relation between recording and playing live? What is the importance of live in your work?

AM In my performances I just find fun, pleasure in doing music in public. In the 1980's I did only very few live shows.

HUO When did you start by the way?

AM I started around 1980. My original idea was to only record music in the studio. I was against live performance, because I didn't like the charisma of it. Therefore, I had no idea about live performance for a long time. It is only when I did a long tour in America that I found pleasure in live performance.

HUO When was the first time you went to the United States?

AM In 1989-1990. It is more physical pleasure, with my body and sound. After that, I continued to make live performances more often. Basically, to people with whom I work in live performance, I just give the task of supporting my sound. I play with some people, but it is just a part of my idea.

HUO Is there also a visual presence when you make live performances? Are there visual elements? do you make videos from your performances?

AM In the early times, I used a lot films. Sometimes I have video but to me it is not too important. I am more interested in strong, simple effects like lighting installations, smoke, stroboscopic light, not images.

HUO What about your distribution? How prints your records and CDs, who buys them?

AM 4 or 5 records came out with Alchemy records, ca 2000 copies each. (It's not collect.I made over 200 records&CDs already.each copies are 20-5000.I don't know how many copies each label sold.

HUO Who buys them? Is it very young people, people interested in electronic music or in techno? Who is your audience?

AM Yes, it is young people, people interested in techno, and noise maniacs.

HUO In a European context, what would be your links? Mika Vainio told me he likes what you are doing, so there is a dialogue. Are there other people beside Pan Sonic in Europe with whom you have a dialogue, and could you tell me about Pan Sonic? what do you think about Mika Vainio?

AM I know Pan Sonic through Russell Haswell who told me there were strange Finnish guys who don't speak English and use very big electronics and make simple sounds. I was very interested and when I listened to their CD, it was great. HUO Do you like any other European experimental music?

AM I am interested in any new extreme stuff,I think "mego people" is one of the most extreme computer music being doing now.

UMB Is your audience different in Europe than here in Japan or is it in both context people who share the same interests?

AM There is more opportunity to get different audiences in Europe because in Europe there are many more different categories of art and music which are linked, whereas in Japan, it is much more difficult to get across in the same way. In Europe I can play with techno people, more contemporary people. There aren't the same opportunities in Japan...

UMB How did you get in touch with the people from Blast. Are you produced also in England?

AM When I played in London, Blast was organized by Sho I knew Russell and they were interested in my music and so they contacted me.

HUO I want to return to something we evoked earlier, concerning the record labels. When we interviewed Eye Yamatuka, he is really in this intermediary position: that on the one hand, he would do things which are completely mainstream, he would be on a record with Ken Ishi something like this, and on the other, he would do really experimental stuff. Are you interested in this kind of double situation or are you on the contrary taking the position that you do radical stuff and push it to the limits? How do you see this sort of positioning within a music context and the music industry. Is it on the fringes, or are you interested in it getting a bigger diffusion?

AM I hate Japanese music business, I would never do that.

HUO So you refuse to participate in that kind of thing?

AM They have no interest and I don't care about it. I am interested in new and creative ideas, I don't care if it's major or minor.

HUO beside your records, Russell also told me about your books. what kind of books are they?

AM I have published 13 books. Some are about noise music and sound work and counterculture, including SM bondage. I still work with some magazines

HUO which kind of magazines are you involved in?

AM I am writing for some S-M magazines and, I am writing about modern architecture in Tokyo. My main interest is in the 1920 till 30s Of Japanese architecture, especially unknown Nameless architecture.

HUO Earlier today we visited Kazuyo Shinohara in his centennial hall and he showed us early modern buildings in Japan.

AM You saw much modern architecture in Tokyo today? In 1918, we had a huge earthquake in Tokyo. After the earthquake, the city was completely destroyed and it was necessary to rebuild. The city authority organized the rebuilding of the city and especially the official area of Marunouchi with official buildings. In the old downtown area which dated from Edo period, they had no architects, so they redid the Western idea. The buildings in that area are not by architects but just by ordinary carpenters who interpreted western references. They introduced western influences. but it is interesting because sometimes they used cheap materials, not real stone although it looks like it.

HUO Have you published any book on this issue?

AM I hope to publish something

HUO this will be my last question. I have heard rumors which say that you are doing a project of 4à or 50 CDs, could you tell me about this mega CD project.

AM Yes, it's called 'Merzbox'. Releasing on Australian label called Extreme. 50 CDs which including almost all delated LPs and some very old & new unreleased materials. Also, special package and lots of Merzbow goods as T-shirts, Medallion, book, stecker, CD Rom etc. I hope it will ready in September.

TRANSCRIPT OF DIALOGUE

Girl: Tell me death what do you know about death?

Skeleton: You are somewhere else; I cannot tell you exactly but it is strange

G: What do you mean by strange; do you see flowers; do you see a blue sky. Or is it only dark?

S: It is not really dark. I see the darkness and I see more than before but it is something that I cannot tell you. It is something strange; so strange.

G: Are you sad? Are you sad that your life is over?

S: Come on girl, don't be pathetic, let's speak about something else please.

G: Don't be sad, don't be sad you look fine, a little skinny and your bones are shiny.

S: I know. I know I'm dead. Let me sing you a song about my past maybe it will help you to understand what it means to be dead. Listen to me: la, la, la,

Skeleton singing

I wake up up every day every day every day and ask me why I am here why I am why am am and I say
good morning day morning day morning day la la la la la la la la la la la la

Come on life life life be not rude be not rude I am not a asshole asshole asshole asshole asshole I try only to be nice to be nice to and that is enough enough enough enough enough

What can I do can I do can I do do do do how can I change something something something something
now that is always the old question old question old quest quest quest the old the old old old old old old
old old

Hello darkness hello dark hello dark hello dark I don't know why you are so dark. hello my old friend
darkness dark tell me what is really important and what is not not not not not not not soo important

La la la la la la la la la la la la la la la La la la la la la la la la la la la la la la La la la la la la la la la
la la la la la la la La la la la la la la la la la la la la la la La la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la

S: See? It is always the same story.

G: What do you think? Is life really about changing something? I don't do that and I feel very good. You failed, but look at you; you look very impressive. I was always wondering how many bones we have.

Oooooooooooooooohheääääh heöölo dar dar dar dar ööööo kness darkness daääääärknessss
Oooooooooooooooohheääääh heöölo dar dar dar dar ööööo kness darkness daääääärknessss

S: Why do you come here then, why do you want to die?

G: Oh, no big reason. I only want talk to you, my old friend and after that I want to kill you with my axe, only because I'd like to kill someone who is already dead.

S: You are too stupid to die, enjoy your flesh and blood and wait till your time is over. Bye-bye sexy; see you later!