

New Waves of Noise in the 1980s and 1990s: EYE, Haino, Otomo, YoshimiO

by David Novak

Japan's millennial pop culture boom was extraordinarily productive for a new generation of visual and conceptual artists, building over decades into a global reception of postmodernist Japan, imagined through the super-flat world of Murakami Takeshi, and expanded by Nara Yoshitomo, Mori Mariko, Yanobe Kenji, and others. The 1980s and 1990s were also a crucial time for contemporaneous innovations in music and sound, jumpstarting a slow but steadily growing reception of Japanese "noise" (sometimes, and controversially, as "Japanoise") by global audiences in the following decades. The arc of this sonic history has only just begun to be followed, bringing attention to rich developments in improvisation, technological experimentation, sound art, and underground music. Narratives of Japanese popular music in the 1980s typically focused on the heavily produced electronic city pop of Yellow Magic Orchestra, or the glitzy idol pop of Seiko Matsuda et al., as divergent poles in a New Wave zeitgeist of techno-Japanese newness, superficiality, and appropriation that was at once naive and cynical. It was at the fringes of this global uptake that another kind of sound came into earshot, reflecting the more cacophonous and dissonant echoes of Japan's post-bubble moment.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, "cool Japan" crashed into the West in a postmodernist bricolage of manga and anime, Harajuku *kawaii*, Akihabara *otaku*, and *Shibuya-kei* pop grooves. But on more subterranean channels, a much noisier new wave—fronted by Otomo Yoshihide's genre-busting group Ground Zero, Haino Keiji's intense trio Fushitsusha, and the breakout art-noise mania of Boredoms—streamed out in a flow of innovative recordings representing a surprisingly extreme sound of underground Japan. The early local releases of Boredoms on Osaka labels Public Bath and Japan Overseas, as well as EYE and YoshimiO's many side projects, had triggered a string of releases on major labels, many featuring EYE's stunning psychedelic artwork.¹ By the early 1990s, EYE was touring with John Zorn's *Naked City* ensemble and Boredoms played Lollapalooza and Fuji Rock Festival, while YoshimiO had formed Free Kitten with members of Sonic Youth and Nirvana. Along with Ground Zero, Otomo Yoshihide issued a diverse spectrum of solo recordings, ranging from sample-based

noise collage to guitar solos to film scores, and improvised turntable collaborations with Christian Marclay, EYE, Sachiko M, and Bob Ostertag. At the same time, Haino Keiji slowly and almost singlehandedly inspired an international cult around the Tokyo-based P.S.F. label that released his solo recordings and group collaborations.

While this enthusiastic overseas reception provoked Japanese attention to the local music underground in Osaka and Tokyo (a phenomenon known as *gyaku-yunyu*, or reverse importation), the difficulty of acquiring recordings in the analog mediascape kept the scene deeply submerged for decades. In my book, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation*, I argued that the special circumstances of this pre-internet media circulation formed loops of cultural feedback between North America and Japan, which were mystified by transnational disjunctures, delays, and distortions, but also fostered a productive cycle of mutual influence that has continued for decades.² Equally important in pushing the Japanoise scene to the forefront of global attention was an intensely embodied and sonically overwhelming performance style that skirted the edges of performance art, danger music, Butoh, and endurance art in a series of legendary punk rock and political happenings in Osaka during the 1980s and 1990s.

At the *Parergon* exhibition, it was the integration of vital live performances by EYE, Haino, Otomo, and SAICOBAB that introduced the dynamism of Japan's underground music to Los Angeles in 2019, demonstrating the powerful overlaps between art, sound, noise, and music. At Blum & Poe, EYE hunched among a packed crowd, wires strapped to his gloved hands: Those immersed in the crush felt the wild dynamism of EYE's sudden and spectacular gestures and shouts, mapped onto a shower of noise.

Upstairs, a solid wall of Gin Satoh's stark black-and-white photography documented the jittery energy of Japan's 1980s punk and hardcore scene, centered on his now-legendary photograph of EYE atop a bulldozer, crashing through the Toritsu Kasei Super Loft club in 1985. A display of obscure LPs, cassettes, and other archival detri-

1. EYE was also commissioned to produce the artwork for Beck, *Midnite Cultures*, Geffen, 1999, compact disc.

2. David Novak, *Japanoise: Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013). See also "In Search of Japanoise: Globalizing Underground Music," in *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, eds. Alisa Freeman and Toby Slade (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 168-79.

tus (mined from the collection of Black Editions label chief Peter Kolovos) revealed the unique artwork and small-scale craft productions of Japanese independent music labels. At Zebulon in LA's Frogtown, Haino mesmerized a sold-out audience with his droning, harsh, electrified hurdy-gurdy solo; a week later, Otomo conjured noise, feedback, songs, and cut-up samples from his turntables and electric guitar, followed by YoshimiO's vocal acrobatics set against the raga-inflected compositions of sitarist Daikiti Yoshida and drummer Hamamoto Motoyuki in SAICOBAB.

Each of these performers amplifies a sound world uncontained by genres, generations, schools, or scenes. Together, they have generated a resonant subversion that has pushed against the boundaries of art and music from the 1980s until the present. Their inclusion in the *Parergon* exhibition contributes to a critical art history that recognizes music, noise, and sound as part of a radical moment of cosmopolitan globalist intervention in the 1980s and 1990s. Digging into this historical moment of discovery, one discovers a deeper and more diverse history of experimentation, emerging from underground music scenes in Tokyo and Osaka rooted in messier forms of improvisation, psychedelic guitar rock, Butoh, free jazz, and radical physical performance tracing back to the links between anti-art, underground theater, and experimental music in the 1960s and 1970s. Below are brief sketches for each artist, to hint at how their careers reflect a unique confluence of cultural and aesthetic influences that challenges contemporary aesthetic divisions of image, music, sound, and performance.

HAINO KEIJI: SUMMONING NOTHINGNESS INTO SOUND

Over the past three decades, Haino Keiji has gradually become an iconic figure of the Japanese underground, known for his compelling performances on guitar, percussion, electronics, and hurdy-gurdy—having recorded over 170 albums over his prolific career (solo, in collaborations, and in groups like Fushitsusha, Nijiumu, Aihiyo, Vajra, Senhedrin, Seijaku, and Naboranai)—and for the mysterious aura of his challenging sounds and obscure lyrics. Steeped in an occult approach to sonic practice, Haino has always cut an intimidating figure as a countercultural icon and anti-hippie spiritualist, caped and cloaked in a curtain of black—now silver—hair, his eyes shielded by wraparound shades, leaning unsmilingly on his cane. His language is elliptical; he eschews interviews, and his enigmatic persona so deeply

resists categorization that his existential confrontations with meaning and representation have become an essential part of his worldview. On his website, a few sentences of poetry blurrily float on a black page: “with/the unwillingness to know/coexists/the unwillingness to be known/so/the refusal to know/accelerates/the gap in the black luster.”³

But Haino's career, as iconoclastic as it has been, also carves a trace around the broad influences of the Japanese underground in the 1980s and 1990s, subtly revealing the borders of its political and aesthetic formations. As a teenager in the 1960s, Haino was inspired by Japanese underground theater and the work of Antonin Artaud, but a fascination with The Doors' Jim Morrison led him to self-taught guitar and vocal improvisation. His earliest recorded performance, with the free-jazz-inspired group Lost Aaraaff, took place in August 1971 at the legendary Sanritsuka Genyasai festival, at which leftist activists, local farmers, and underground musicians joined forces in a three-day bacchanal to protest the controversial expansion of the Narita International Airport. But even in this edgy context, with a lineup including such radical acts as Zuno Keisatsu (Brain Police) and Takayanagi Masayuki's New Direction, nineteen-year-old Haino's noisy guitar and antagonistic death threats shocked the audience, who threw stones at the band and eventually forced them off the stage.



Keiji Haino, *Watasbi Dake*

Following this infamous debut, Haino retreated into private experiments and did not return to public performance until 1979, with the introduction of his new experimental rock group Fushitsusha, at the influential Kichijoji coffeehouse Minor. Although the tiny space existed for less than three years, Minor had a deep and lasting impact inspiring many of the improvisational, electronic, and punk groups that later emerged in the Tokyo underground. After Minor closed in 1980, Haino retreated into illness and isolation, but not before releasing his first recording, the intensely noisy *Watasbi Dake?* (“Just Me?”).⁴ The LP, like many of Haino's recordings to come, was issued in an almost pitch-black cover, featuring only Gin Satoh's inky portrait on its face and a barely legible list of obscure titles on the back. Haino reports that the album was recorded in total darkness. “I wanted to have to grope blindly on the guitar to find each individual sound,” he recalls. “I wanted to create the music from a place of absolute nothingness.”⁵ The recording, dominated by distorted vocals, feedback, and deeply noisy silences, offered up a world of total sonic abstraction that was emotionally intense while remaining distant and impenetrable.

The 1990s brought Haino into contact with an emerging audience in Japan, Europe, and North America through a string of recordings on Ikeezeumi Hideo's P.S.F. label. Crucially, these recordings opened channels to overseas listeners and collectors, who quickly developed a cult

3. Fushitsusha website, accessed August 22, 2019, <http://www.fushitsusha.com/en/black.html>.

4. The album was released on Minor owner Sato's nascent label Pinakotheca in 1981, and reissued to great acclaim by LA-based Black Editions in 2017. Haino Keiji, *Watasbi Dake?*, Pinakotheca, 1981, vinyl LP.

5. Haino, Keiji. “Like an Anthithetical Keiji Haino: A Conversation with Keiji Haino on his early years and *Watasbi Dake?*,” interview by Takeshi Goda, trans. Alan Cummings, Black Editions Group, January 29, 2017, <http://www.blackeditionsgroup.com/antithetical-interview-haino>. Haino expands on his personal iconography of nothingness in another recent interview: “Have you seen the *kanji* for Haino? They read ‘ash field’—there's nothing there. That's why I can improvise.” Keiji Haino, “Keiji Haino at 65: ‘I want to be a bad boy, right until the end,’” interview with James Hadfield, *Japan Times*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2017/07/18/music/keiji-haino-at-65-i-want-to-be-a-bad-boy-right-until-the-end/>.

following for P.S.F. that centered on Haino's solo work and Fushitsusha. Those who had the chance to see Haino on his rare US tours and caught Fushitsusha's blistering sets at Tonic in New York City, or his solo tambourine and cymbal performances opening for Faust in San Francisco, quickly spread the word. Haino is also a prolific collaborator, working with Stephen O'Malley, Charles Hayward, Jim O'Rourke, Oren Ambarchi, and Derek Bailey, as well as Ruins, Merzbow, Boris, and EYE.

For Haino, music is an illusion, while sound is the most powerful thing in the universe. There are no wrong notes: instruments, voices, noises, and silences all emerge from individual consciousness. "In most languages," he explains, "they are called 'instruments': namely tools, as we use them to do something. But if players regard instruments as part of ourselves, they would sound in ways that even the instruments never expected."⁶ Haino dislikes his work being described as "noise music" (*noizu*) or as "improvisation" (*sokkyo ongaku*), preferring his own word *nazoranai*, or "not repeating" to describe his sonic expression. The term sums up his constantly changing recognition of time and the cycles of daily life: "If we regret, we repeat. We stop the best part of ourselves, through which we can get faster forever."

MOTTOMO OTOMO
(MAXIMUM OTOMO)

Though born a decade later, Otomo Yoshihide shares several traits with Haino, including a strong influence from free jazz, a diverse range of collaborations and ensembles, a powerful history of solo work, and a feedback-driven approach to guitar improvisation. But if Haino represents the isolated and stubbornly immutable core of the Japanese underground, Otomo demonstrates its flexible inclusivity with his constantly expanding approach to sonic expression and community organization. If Haino is the dark shadow of Japan's underground, Otomo is its most public-facing figure, and one of the most widely recognized performer-composers in Japan. Otomo is a musical polymath, with a four-decade career that has incorporated film soundtracks and television scores, jazz quartets, electronic music, turntablism, solo guitar feedback, through-composed rock music, improvisational collectives, sound art installations, traditional dance music, writing, and curating major international art and music festivals.

Otomo spent his childhood in the small northern city of Fukushima, but left for Tokyo as a teenager to become guitar innovator Takayanagi Masayuki's disciple, building his electronics and learning from him the basics of the instrument. Through Takayanagi, Otomo was exposed to the use of feedback and noise in guitar improvisation. "In the '70s, his free jazz stuff already sounded a lot like noise... [He showed me that] you can utilize a lot of feedback in your performance, and it was his choice of using the electric guitar as his instrument that led him to that sound."⁷ But Otomo soon broke from Takayanagi's

devotion to solo performance. "He always told me, 'don't play with others.' I didn't like that. I like to play samba with my Brazilian friends; I like to play punk music; so I like to do all these kinds of music, and felt really stressed out and oppressed by that idea."⁸ A few years later, Otomo began to collaborate with musicians from the influential downtown New York improvisation scene, picking up ideas from John Zorn about how to conduct improvisational ensembles during his extended sojourns to Tokyo in the mid-1980s, as well as artist Christian Marclay, who inspired him to bring his love of French *musique concrete* and reel-to-reel tape manipulation into experimental turntablism.⁹ By the 1990s, Otomo seemed to be everywhere, performing live on turntables, releasing noise and sample-based experimental recordings, and touring internationally with his ensemble Ground Zero.¹⁰ In the 2000s, his collaborations with Sachiko M in I.S.O. and Filament, and with *onkyo* innovators Nakamura Toshimaru, Akiyama Tetuzi, and Sugimoto Taku further pushed his sound into extreme territory, while his "new jazz" ensemble ONJQ played experimental versions of Eric Dolphy and Charles Mingus at the famed jazz club Shinjuku Pit Inn.

Despite this tireless production, Otomo remained relatively obscure in Japan until the early 2010s, when a strange confluence of events brought him abruptly into the public spotlight. After the triple disaster of March 11th, 2011, Otomo returned to Fukushima, joining forces with punk legend Endo Michiro and local poet Wago Ryoichi to start

Project Fukushima!, the centerpiece of which is an ongoing summer festival intended to return cultural performance to the traumatized Tohoku region and "make Fukushima a positive word."¹¹ As the project developed over the next years, Otomo's score for the 2013 NHK national television program *Amachan*, an astronomically popular TV show set in the affected Tohoku region, streamed into the households of millions of Japanese viewers. "I thought that it would be great if we had a comedy set in that totaled area, because nothing is going to get solved by talking about things seriously...telling all of these ridiculous silly jokes just to stay afloat, in a way."¹² His sudden popularity buoyed the public perception of *Project Fukushima!*, which brought new attention to the region and its ongoing struggles with the effects of the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster. The soundtrack also helped establish Otomo as a core organizer in the public arts world, moving from (as he puts it) "that weird noise guy, sort of on the edge of society, to a very

6. Haino Keiji. "Keiji Haino on Playing, Listening and Thinking About Art," filmed December 5, 2014, at Red Bull Music Academy, Tokyo, video, 1:28:23, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyIEbcwz_n8.

7. Otomo Yoshihide, Interview with David Novak, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, May 4, 2019.

8. Ibid.

9. Otomo and Marclay have performed together as a duo several times, and on a collaborative recording: Christian Marclay and Otomo Yoshihide, *Moving Parts*, Asphodel Records, 2000, compact disc.

10. A sampling of recordings from this decade demonstrates Otomo's expansive stylistic range, from noise and sampling (*Memory Disorder, The Night Before the Death of the Sampling Virus*), turntablism (*Vinyl Tranquilizer, DJ Carhouse and MC Hellshit Live!*), improvisational group performance with Ground Zero (*Revolutionary Pekinese Opera Ver. 1.28, Plays Standards, Consume Red*) and in other ensembles (*We Insist?, Novo Tono, I.S.O., Filament*), as well as soundtracks for several Chinese films (*The Blue Kite, Summer Snom*) and a long list of other collaborations. An extensive discography is available at the Improvised Music from Japan website, accessed August 21, 2019, <http://www.japanimprov.com/yotomo/disco.html>.

11. Project Fukushima!, website accessed August 21, 2019, <http://www.pj-fukushima.jp/en/>. I discuss the festival further in David Novak, "Project Fukushima! Performativity and the Politics of Festival in Post-3/11 Japan," *Anthropological Quarterly* 90 (Winter 2017): 225-254.

12. Otomo Yoshihide, Interview with David Novak, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, May 4, 2019.

welcomed character.”¹³ Expanding on his earlier practices, Otomo began a series of improvisation workshops with local musicians and displaced children from the region, as well as speaking widely in public talks, books, interviews, television specials, and his blog *Jam Jam Diary*. At the end of 2013, he won the Japan Record Award for the *Amachan* theme, and led a large ensemble on the famous NHK New Year’s Eve music program *Koubaku Uta Gassen* (Red and White Song Battle) featuring the most popular artists in the nation. *Project Fukushima!* continues as an annual local festival, as well as a streaming online channel, and a touring orchestra and exhibition with performances and displays at the Aichi Triennale, Mori Art Museum, and at other public art venues.¹⁴



Otomo Yoshihide, Cafe Oto, London, UK, 2013. Photo: Andy Newcombe.

Otomo has recently taken on further curatorial projects that open up new possibilities for a collaborative “social turn” within art and music worlds in Japan and across Asia. In 2017, he was appointed as guest director of the triennial Sapporo International Art Festival. Under the theme, “What is an art festival?” his programming included collaborative performances between local musicians and visiting performers; visual and sound archives in government buildings and shopping arcades that were accessible to the public; and site-specific talks, performances, and installations in contexts of everyday life across the city. In addition to incorporating artworks and performances by EYE, Umeda Tetsuya, Tone Yasunao, Suzuki Akio, and Christian Marclay, two concerts at the Asian Meeting Festival gathered musicians from ASEAN-affiliated nations in open improvisational performances, as part of an ongoing Japan-Foundation-sponsored project called Ensembles Asia.¹⁵ Otomo sees these projects as a way of connecting artists and performers across Asia in a new transcultural network of noise. In this context, Chinese or Vietnamese musicians are not restrained by local styles or regional identifications: “They’re not doing ‘their version’ of noise music... it’s beyond borders, in that noise music is just noise music.”

SPIRAL CIRCULATIONS: EYE, YOSHIMIO, SAICOBAB AND THE PROLIFERATING UNIVERSE OF BOREDOMS

If Boredoms became the most celebrated band of the 1980s and 1990s Japanese underground, everything about their trajectory is surprising: their formation out of the Kansai noise and punk scene, their sudden popularity both in Japan and overseas, their unlikely signing by major labels, their appearances at Lollapalooza, their constantly changing roster of members and proliferating side projects, and their transformation from cut-up hardcore art punk to

hyper-rhythmic psychedelic trance. While the band is best known for a string of late 1990s releases on WB/ Reprise and WEA Japan (the *Super Roots* series, *Super Ae*, *Vision Creation Newsun*), by the end of the decade Boredoms had returned to more underground status, changing

their name to Vooredoms, while EYE himself changed his own name several times, from Yamatsuka Eye, to Yamantaka Eye to Yamataka Eye, to just eYe and then EYË. There is a long list of Boredoms-related side projects: Audio Sports, AOA, Dendoba, Destroy 2, Octopus, Hanadensha, Noise Ramones, Omoide Hatoba, OOIOO, Puzzle Punks, Rashinban, UFO or Die, the Borettronix cassettes and the Reboire remix series, as well as EYE’s striking cover artwork, all of which composed

a universe of sound, image, and performance that helped make Osaka the center of Japanese underground music in the 1980s and 1990s.

EYE began his performing career in 1983 as the core member of the notorious performance ensemble Hanatarashi (“Snotnose”), with Tabata Mitsuru and then Taketani Ikuo. After a handful of dangerous performances featuring Molotov cocktails, circular saws, barrels of metal trash, and the legendary “bulldozer” show (at which EYE drove a backhoe into the Tokyo Loft Club, as documented in Gin Satoh’s widely circulated photographs of the event), the group was immediately banned from local venues. EYE quickly formed Boredoms and released two recordings—1986’s *Anal by Anal* and *Osorezan no Stooges Kyo* [*The Stooges Craze in Osorezan*] in 1988—eventually settling into a core group with drummers YoshimiO (then Yoshimi P-we) and Yoshikawa Toyohito, guitarist Yamamoto Seiichi, and bassist Hira. According to EYE, the band’s location in Osaka allowed them more freedom to create strange music and perform in uncommon spaces, helping to make the Kansai area a hotbed of noise in the 1980s and a symbol of underground music in the 1980s. Boredoms’ unlikely signing to WEA Japan and WB Reprise unleashed 1992’s *Pop Tatari*, an abrasive, nonsensical and extremely noisy recording which, despite being perhaps the strangest album ever released by a major label, was widely praised by critics and brought Boredoms to national and international attention. EYE and YoshimiO were suddenly everywhere in Japan’s alternative media, appearing on magazine covers, fashion shoots, and even as temporary hosts on television shows; t-shirts with EYE’s artwork sold out in minutes at shows. But a few years after Boredoms built a global audience with the hyperactive genre-bending art-core of *Pop Tatari*, *Wow 2* (1993) and *Chocolate Synthesizer* (1994), EYE began moving the band in new directions with the *Super Roots* EPs, creating a Krautrock-influenced minimalist trance sound that culminated with *Super ae* (1998) and *Vision Creation Newsun* (1999). Then, at the turn of the millennium, Boredoms practically disappeared for seven years, performing infrequently as

13. Ibid.

14. The festival also became the subject of a documentary film entitled *Project Fukushima!*, directed by Fujii Hikaru, 2013.

15. Asian Meeting Festival, About, accessed August 21, 2019, <http://asianmusic-network.com/en/about/>.

Vooredoms, dropping their major label connections, and releasing only one LP (2004's *Seadrum/House of Sun*, which had been recorded several years earlier).

After a few years of minimal activity, EYE and YoshimiO reemerged with an influential series of performances known as *Boadrum*, large ensembles of drummers gathered in different locations around the world, which electrified audiences and became the basis of EYE's music through the 2000s. EYE initially imagined *Boadrum* after receiving to an invitation from Deitch Projects to create an installation in their space. "You know how parking lots in the US are huge, and the cars are all lined up and shiny, like drum sets? So

I thought, what if each of the cars in this parking lot were a drum? We were thinking about an installation that we'd call *Parking Drum Ritual* with 77 cars in the gallery, but nobody would be able to come in."¹⁶ While the idea never materialized at Deitch, EYE's concept eventually morphed into *Boadrum 77*, in which 77 drummers performed in a spiral formation at Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park under the Brooklyn Bridge, commencing at 7:07 p.m. on July 7, 2007, and ending 77 minutes later. Eye stood in the middle, performing on a large object named "The Sevens," something like a seven-necked staircase of guitar necks. "It's something you can hit to make noise," said EYE, "but I also was picturing a ladder—as if I could climb it and just keep going up... more as an object of 'access' or 'connecting' than as a musical instrument." *Boadrum 77* was followed up by *88 Boadrum* at the La Brea Tar Pits on 8/8/08 at 8:08 p.m., while a satellite performance featuring 88 different drummers took place three hours earlier at 8:08 p.m. in Brooklyn. *Boadrums 9* and *Boadrums 10* were held in Manhattan and Melbourne, respectively, and *111 Boadrum* gathered another huge spiral of 111 drummers in Byron Bay on 11/11/11. In recent years, EYE has begun exhibiting his paintings, collages, ink drawings, and screen prints, as well as the multimedia installation *Dot Kai Dot* at the 2017 Sapporo International Art Festival, which immersed experiencers in sound and glittering Day-Glo stars in an almost pitch-black room.¹⁷

YoshimiO represents the other primary axis of the Boredoms universe, as the only other consistent member since 1986, when she joined as the band's second drummer after collaborating with EYE in a duo project called UFO OR DIE. Her unique improvised vocals—a mix of moaning, chanting, and ear splitting screams—became crucial for Boredoms' sound, especially in their visceral live performances. "Ever since I started drumming," she said, "for some reason I would just start screaming. I'd sing the whole time I played... it's like something comes out before I speak, before it can become words."¹⁸ It was YoshimiO's intuitive

style, and her shared interest in the trance-inducing effects of long repetitive rhythms and chants, that moved to the center of Boredoms' sound in the 1990s. She expanded further with OOIOO, an innovative all-female experimen-



77Boadrum, 77 drummers from around the world, Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park, Brooklyn, NY, July 7, 2007 at 7:07pm. Photo: Jason Nocito.

tal rock group founded in 1995 and continuing for over two decades with shifting personnel. OOIOO was initially assembled when YoshimiO gathered friends Kyoko, Maki, and Yoshiko to form a fake band for a photo shoot. But the group spontaneously began improvising songs and performing together, creating a style that freely mixed progressive rock and psychedelic electronic sounds with free jazz, exotica, and world music influences. YoshimiO describes how OOIOO's music begins in visual imagination that inspires their

sound. "I'll imagine what the color of our clothing should be for our next show, and then I'll be able to visualize a setting that we've never played in, and I'll be able to see ourselves playing onstage. Maybe I'll imagine us wearing red costumes and playing in a beautiful green rice paddy. And then I'll imagine, *What kind of music would be cool if we played there?*"¹⁹ On the 2006 album *Taiga*, OOIOO used rhythmic textures and buzzing electronics to evoke a natural soundscape, while 2014's *Gamel* incorporated the shimmering and clashing sounds and chants of Balinese gamelan into heavy looping grooves and dissonant tone clusters.

In OOIOO as well as her solo performances and other projects, YoshimiO's fluid genre-shifting interest in musical influences from Southeast Asia, Africa, Okinawa, and India conjures a unique mix of experimental art-rock with global music traditions.²⁰ In the late 1990s, she joined

SAICOBAB, previously known as Psycho Baba, a long-running collaboration between sitarist Daikiti Yoshida and tabla player Yuzawa Hironori. "The two of them did kind of classical [Indian] stuff, and then I came slamming in from left field, just throwing my voice in there. All along I'd wanted to do a hardcore band, like, grindcore, so I kind of turned it into a 'raga-core' band."²¹ Now joined by percussionist Motoyuki "Hama" Hamamoto and bassist Akita Goldman, Daikiti combines Japanese numerology and Indian rhythmic subdivisions to generate intricate compositions, over which YoshimiO layers her unique vocalizations. While the sitar-based compositions on 2017's *Sab Se Purani Bab* strongly give the feeling of Indian music structures, YoshimiO's use of

16. EYE and YoshimiO, Interview with Hisham Akira Baroocha, *BOMB*, July 1, 2008, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/boredoms/>.

17. Some of EYE's recent works have been collected in the catalogue *Ongaloo* documenting his 2006 solo exhibition at Magical Artroom in Tokyo. Eye, Yamataka, *Ongaloo* (Little More, 2006).

18. YoshimiO, Interview with Hara Masaaki, Red Bull Music Academy, filmed May 8, 2019, Tokyo, video, 57:25, <https://www.redbullmusicacademy.com/lectures/yoshimio/>.

19. YoshimiO, Interview with John Colpitts, *Modern Drummer*, September 2019, <https://www.modrndrummer.com/article/september-2019-boredoms-yoshimio/>.

20. The trend is especially evident in many "ethnic" [*esunikku*] music festivals that have long been definitive for Japan's counterculture, and its spiritualist and ecological tendencies. On the rise of reggae as part of the *esunikku* subculture in contemporary Japan, see Marvin Sterling, *Babylon East: Performing Dancehall, Roots Reggae, and Rasafari in Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

21. YoshimiO, Interview with Hara Masaaki.

digital effects and occasional bursts of distortion and noise mark the recording as something quite different than a faithful rendition of traditional music, yet touches on an aura of universal spirituality. In order to be able to ignore the rules, the band says, one first needs “to train yourself to be aware of the most ancient rules of the universe.”²² In a recent interview, YoshimiO expanded on this approach, downplaying her role as a drummer or vocalist and instead stressing her intuitive approach to sonic expression: “It’s not about ego but expressing yourself through an instrument; it’s about releasing any attachments you have about yourself. You observe what is emanating from inside of you, and you transform that into sound. In order to truly be yourself, you have to get rid of rules that things have to be a certain way, and not worry about what people think of you. I think it’s all about how much you know yourself, and how true you are to yourself in your life. The methods you choose [in order] to reach that state don’t really matter.”²³



SAICOBAB. Photo: Ryo Mitamura.

There is, of course, much more to the narratives of Haino, Otomo, EYE, YoshimiO, and SAICOBAB than I can possibly account for in this short piece. While all are now globally recognized figures in Japan’s musical underground, their culture-bending influences expose a cross section of a transdisciplinary creative field that is just beginning to be understood. As curator Mika Yoshitake notes, *parergon*, the Derridean concept at the heart of this exhibition is ordinarily used to identify the inessential supplements of a main body of work, but this meaning was subverted by the New Wave gallery to reframe as central the unmarked byproducts of a more powerful historical narrative. Music and sound are too often confined to a peripheral sidebar in histories of visual art. However, it is not sufficient to describe Japan’s vibrant music underground as a parallel world that is socially adjacent to the pop innovations of its art scene, but cordoned off by material and aesthetic differences. Its cross-platform media and performance innovations, as revealed by the multisensory field of the *Parergon* exhibition, should inspire the long-deferred recognition of sound, music, and noise as central categories of contemporary art history and core subjects of contemporary global culture.

22. “SAICOBAB,” Bandcamp, accessed August 21, 2019, <https://saicobab.bandcamp.com/>.

23. YoshimiO, Interview with John Colpitts.

EYE
April 6, 2019
Blum & Poe



Director:
Reza Monahan

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