

**Excerpt from the chapter “Vox Stimuli: John Duncan’s Unrestrained Explorations” taken from the book *Micro Bionic: Radical Electronic Music and Sound Art in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century***

**By Thomas Bey William Bailey**

---

**Underground, Rooftop and Ether: Ascending in Tokyo**

All of this interaction with the particularly vast, American strains of fear, violence and sexual anxiety was soon to come to a close, once an invite to Japan initiated a number of shifts in the locus of the artist’s activity. As suggested in the previous dialogue with Asai, Duncan’s relocation to Japan was fraught with revelatory experiences and, as is often the case, numerous misunderstandings as well. A man by the name of Takuya Sakaguchi was the initial contact for Duncan in Japan, a biologist studying, as Duncan recalls, “higher nervous energy, which is how the Japanese title translates ...the connections between the locus sirius neuron and the visual cortex.”<sup>1</sup> This research was carried out with the eventual goal of increasing human memory through the growth of brain cells. Sakaguchi’s day job, with its emphasis on fostering some form of biological growth, conveniently merged into his interest in self-produced sound art. After first hearing Duncan on the 1979 *Organic* LP released through AQM, Sakaguchi began a letter-writing campaign that would provide the germ for Duncan’s eventual arrival in Japan in 1982, once the fallout from *Blind Date* had made further Stateside developments too difficult.

The expatriate artist’s local influence would expand significantly throughout the 1980s- this is evidenced by a number of collaborative concerts or record releasing efforts with groups like Hijokaidan, Toshiji Mikawa (also of Incapacitants), Chie Mukai and O’Nancy in French. All of these individuals were, and still are, firmly planted in the underground, but –if high online auction prices of their original recordings are anything to go by- are now venerated as the brave, lonely souls whose diligence made broader developments in visceral expression possible. Like Sakaguchi, most of these individuals were tied to day jobs apparently dreary in comparison with their anarchic, colorful musical output. Toshiji Mikawa remains, as of this writing, a section chief in a Tokyo bank, while other members of Hijokaidan were described by Duncan as

“...a housewife, a secretary and an office worker...Hijokaidan is known for their performances, where one of the women who does vocals will also do actions like pissing on stage, or shitting on

stage, and the rest of the members will sort of move around on the stage after this...*in* this...and play homemade electronics, and in the process destroy these homemade electronics. And, as I said before, when I introduce Hijokaidan, people who are not familiar with their gigs when they first see them are rather skeptical that these people are office workers that they're looking at on the stage. But then when they start playing, they shut up, and listen, and, well...change their minds, I hope."<sup>2</sup>

During the 1980s, not many Japanese artists would equal Hijokaidan's propensity for showmanship, which simultaneously showered audiences in humor and terror. Duncan would respond in kind with performances of his own, though- performance pieces like *Move Forward* (1984) featured about 20 minutes of massive, tangible sound output in the darkened, concrete-walled 'Plan B' space in Tokyo, accompanied with film collage –of war atrocities, S+M ritual etc.- being projected onto a paper screen which covered basically the entire visual space of the forward-facing audience, since the projection screen stretched from ceiling to floor and from the left wall to the right. In an unmistakably climactic moment, this screen would be set ablaze by Duncan at the end of the film portion, its fire-consumed remnants sprayed into the audience with a fire extinguisher. Like the earlier *Secret Film*, here was another piece that ended in fiery destruction, continuing Duncan's interest in the elemental- the final destruction of the projection surface, after being used for such an overload of provocative imagery, could on one hand suggest a return to a *tabula rasa* in sorts, an 'unlearning' or transcending of aggressive impulses. Then again, blasting the audience with the remnants of the projection surface could be seen as another none-too-subtle hint that some residue of these primal destructive urges would always be with them, flying back into their faces when least expected.

Actions like the above, which featured a level of un-compromise at least on par with the actions Duncan carried out in the U.S., need to be put in some sort of geographical and historical framework. If they do not seem particularly jarring to jaded veterans of 21<sup>st</sup> century information overload and post-'9/11' nihilism, we must remember that the mid-1980s were an unparalleled period of economic prosperity for Japan. The era of the *endama* –powerful yen, or yen appreciation- was about to begin, and according to one retrospective article on Japan's '80s prosperity,

“Japan's per capita income hit \$17,500 a year- second highest in the world. Land values soared. A square foot of Tokyo real estate sold for the equivalent of \$2,000; a simple wood frame home for 1.5 million dollars. Japan's Economic Planning Agency calculated that

the market value of the nation itself, a California-sized archipelago, was four times greater than that of the U.S.”<sup>3</sup>

Just like the rise of Beat poetry in 1950s America, oppositional aesthetics in such a culture of easy convenience and economic dominance (Japan was also the world's #1 creditor nation at the time) would have seemed ridiculous to the rank-and-file ‘salaryman’ or ‘OL [office lady]’. This is to say nothing of their elders, who, even if they found this culture rampantly materialistic, found it vastly preferable to a state of total war. Defenders of Japan’s mainstream culture could even argue that its market power was what allowed these contrarian activities in the first place: since everything else was so readily provided for her citizens, the existence of some fringe elements displaying a kind of *Nippon Aktionismus* ‘proved’ the robust health, flexibility and all-inclusive nature of the dominant culture. This is true, if only to a certain extent: a good deal of young Japanese from the time lived rent-free with family members (and a sizable number still do today.) With such disposable income on hand, consumption of cultural materials became a choice way to spend this surplus cash: copious amounts of books, magazines, and comics were needed for daily train rides, while large numbers of LPs and cassettes were necessary to enhance cramped home life and to keep current with one’s peer group, who more often than not kept meticulous and status-defining checklists of “must have” media. The ability to consume more media in a smaller amount of time would often turn into curiosity about more ‘exotic’ flavors of culture, and so the door was open to things like Hijokaidan, Merzbow, and John Duncan- if one’s tracking instincts were sharp enough.

But increased spending power and unprecedented diversity in consumer choices was only one side of the story, and at any rate, simple *availability* of radical culture and media did not equal broad-based *acceptance* of its content. At best, the ongoing saga of groups like Hijokaidan was carried out in tiny capsule reviews at the rear pages of magazines like *Fool’s Mate* and *Rock Magazine*, who would cover the *noizu-kei* [noise movement] phenomenon less in the 1990s and 2000s than in the 1980s, even as concert performance and releasing activity in that corner of the underground multiplied exponentially. At any rate, having a safe existence as a contributor to a massively affluent society was not enough to satisfy all people all the time: this often brought with it intense levels of fatigue (as evidenced from the large numbers of napping businessmen on home-bound subway trains), and unsustainable levels of hyper-competition. There was also an alienation from the forces of nature, an appreciation of which was so vital to earlier manifestations of Japanese culture. Meanwhile, Japan’s status of relative cultural isolation and insularity made the various escape routes into other cultures –such as learning second languages- more difficult than usual, and certainly too time-consuming to attempt while already spending one’s days at the office and nights at the *karaoke* bar in moments of compulsory camaraderie. While it was actually cheaper in the 1980s to spend one’s slim allotment of

vacation time abroad in Australia than within Japan proper, long-term involvements in other nations were not as common, which often made the appearance in Japan of a figure like John Zorn or John Duncan a welcome ‘fly in the ointment’ catalyst for new cultural developments.

One notable feature common to most of Japan’s ‘outsider culture’ denizens was their visual similarity to members of the Japanese mainstream: plenty of neat, short haircuts, and indistinct, conservative fashions were to be found among the genuine radicals and perverts. This was in part a necessity, something that allowed people to slip into their underground mode without having to explain themselves to suspicious co-workers. This was also just another rejection of the prevailing materialism, which had spawned countless visually oriented culture tribes: rigidly defined cliques of brightly plumed yet harmless youth whose status as living street-corner sculpture was their main cultural contribution. Such cliques would insist that professional musicians must be marked by special coordinated outfits, handed down by the editors of the premiere Tokyo style guides. But groups like Hijokaidan were the ambassadors of a new anti-professionalism, not “musicians” as the general populace in Japan would have understood the word—as such, there was no set uniform for makers of underground *Gesamtkunstwerk*, performance art or other impossible-to-categorize forms of unmediated expressiveness.

Pockets of resistance –or at least pockets of people who acknowledged and attempted to examine their own ‘outsider’ status- sprung up not only in the culture of free noise and Industrial music, but also in the ‘alternative’ comics scene rotating around weekly magazines like *Garo* and the willfully crude (but not inarticulate) comic artist / essayist Takeshi Nemoto. Direct collaboration between the two scenes seems to have been rare, but both persistently attempted to confront base instincts with the intent of reaching higher eloquence and awareness beyond the glossy but insubstantial artifice of consumer lifestyles. Nemoto’s description of his comics as “propagating like the graffiti you find on a toilet stall” was interesting, especially considering men’s toilet stalls were the precise ‘exhibition space’ of Duncan’s 1985 collection of A1-size collage posters. Like the alternately discomfiting and arousing materials used for *Move Forward*, Duncan’s collages of war imagery and exaggerated pornography were not what anyone had expected to see greeting them in an immaculately well-tended Japanese public restroom, where grooming rituals and maintenance of professional appearance were carried out just as much as the less noble acts of urination and defecation. The posters were placed in Tokyo’s epicenters of fashion (Shibuya), finance (Hibiya), government (KokkaiGijidomae), and entertainment (Shinjuku)- with this strategic placement, Duncan’s simple act hinted that, if the present technological and materialistic utopia was not *built* on primal lusts and aggressive impulses, these things were certainly not absent from it.

Actions like the above were not as common as Duncan's musical performances, which were done both solo and in collaboration. Takuya Sakaguchi claims that "the number of shows that John did during that short stay in Japan were not small",<sup>4</sup> and whatever this exact number may have been, doing just a monthly concert would have been an ambitious undertaking without the proper connections: 'pay to play' policies in Japanese clubs have traditionally priced regular performance schedules outside the range of all but the most dedicated musicians, often forcing the usage of alternate spaces like record shops and cafes.

A 'no bullshit', 'get down to business' attitude was not confined to the Japanese underground musicians' unadorned physical appearance during live performances, but it was also manifested in their choice of sound creation devices, themselves a world away from the dazzling new array of electronic instruments being churned out in Yamaha and Roland workshops. Incapacitants and Hijokaidan had their short-lived, homemade "black box" electronics, while O'Nancy in French created and controlled feedback from amplified oil barrels. For Duncan, shortwave radio was the instrument of choice: a highly portable tool which resisted an user's manipulative movements as much as it accepted them, and which was capable of an extensive dynamic range of sound for those who were willing to hear the musical qualities and rhythmic structures arising from a panoply of hums, crackles, static blasts, and plaintive coded signals. Although he had already been using shortwave during his with the Los Angeles Free Music Society, its use really 'came into its own' (in my humble opinion) during the Japan years.

The shortwave radio was an interesting choice merely for its historical resonance: in the same way that the tiny cell structure of underground music rendered the support of giant media conglomerates unnecessary in order to participate in the shaping of culture, Guglielmo Marconi's brainchild made it unnecessary to have the princely sums of money necessary for longwave transmitters and giant antennae, also opening the communicative floodgates much like the Internet would, some 70 years in advance. The difficulty of censoring shortwave broadcasts and monitoring listeners' access to these broadcasts also gives it some distinct advantages over the latter medium. Duncan claims that, during his stay in Japan, he was staying awake until almost sunrise drinking coffee and making shortwave compositions, fascinated by the fact that

"...it's always different, shortwave is never the same twice when you turn it on from night to night, you don't hear the same things

ever. And I'm not talking about the regular stations, I'm talking about the events between the stations- that was where shortwave really got interesting- it was always unique, always different, and the human voice is [also] like that."<sup>5</sup>

Even though Duncan adopted shortwave for such aleatory qualities, it has uncannily adapted itself to his personality and his own artistic intentions: the results that he achieves with the shortwave radio cannot be easily compared to, say, the work of AMM's Keith Rowe with the same device. Rowe's subtle and almost cautious approach to this tool parallels the aesthetic he developed with tabletop guitar, while Duncan uses the instrument in a way that, like much of his other work, rewards concentrated, high-volume listening of the recorded results. Rowe also became a recognized 'virtuoso' of shortwave by his ability to maximize the serendipitous power of the instrument (suddenly finding broadcast voices which seemed to comment on AMM's improvisations as they were happening.) Duncan was, as he has stated above, more concerned with the interstices: in his hands the shortwave radio was not so much a medium for transmitting human communications as it was for transmitting the sound of atmospheric disturbances and galactic forces greater than what normally fell into our immediate field of comprehension. The sound artist / composer Michael Prime, who performs using a 'bioactivity translator' (a device which amplifies the fluctuating voltage potentials or bioelectric signals inherent in all natural life) has written simply, but eloquently, on the larger implications of harnessing shortwave transmissions as an expressive tool:

"Shortwave signals interpenetrate our bodies at all times, and provide a vast musical resource. The signals may originate from cosmic sources, such as the sun, pulsars, and quasars, or from human sources. However, they are all modified and intermodulated by the earth's own nervous system, the magnetic particles that surround the planet like layers of onion. These layers expand and contract under the influence of weather systems [...] to produce complex patterns of manipulation."<sup>6</sup>

More fascinating than any of this, though, is the way in which these forces have combined to produce signature sonic elements whose source is largely taken for granted. Prime continues:

"Many of the characteristic effects of electronic music (such as ring modulation, filtering, phase-shifting and electronic drone textures) were first heard in the interaction of radio broadcasts with the

earth's magnetic layers. Perhaps Gaia was the first composer of electronic music.”<sup>7</sup>

Such sentiments have inspired a whole micro-movement within the music detailed in this book, populated by artists like Swiss ‘cracked electronics’ duo Voice Crack and the exacting Bay Area sound artist Scott Arford, whose hyper-real compositions tend to straddle the ‘concrete’ and ‘abstract’ divide. It also has to be admitted that, as far as instruments go, the shortwave is an incredibly versatile producer of sound textures for the price- like most sound generators that are incapable of producing melodic music, it relies on variation in other audible phenomena: the thickness in the distortion of its signal, the velocity of its crackling and chirping noises, and the randomness in the attenuation of otherwise constant electrical hum. The shortwave functions both as a tool for personal enlightenment and amusement, as well as being a metaphor for the challenges we face in making meaningful communication, beset on all sides by countless forms of natural and human interference: at least this is the feeling one gets when listening to Duncan’s shortwave-based pieces like *Riot* and *Trinity*, dense and occasionally opaque manifestations of elemental sound.

Radio would become a productive tool in Duncan’s hands in more ways than one, though, as he also set out to make pirate broadcasts of events that would likely never make it onto commercial Japanese radio (and, to this day, still haven’t.) His pirate radio program *Radio Code* was the kind of thing which, given its superior ability to investigate and document street-level reality when compared to the mass media, calls into question the concept of “amateurism”. Although *Radio Code* was broadcast using no more than a Walkman, a transmitter with a 7km range, and a stereo microphone with earphones taped to it (this allowed for music to be played from the Walkman while “talking over” it as a typical radio DJ might), the sheer eclecticism of the sonic art it presented was well beyond the scope of other media outlets in the area. A radical fusion of preciously unheard music, social commentary and fairly innocent playfulness was employed: highlights included on-location broadcasts of O’Nancy in French and Chie Mukai’s band Che Shizu, an audio portrait of an attempted suicide (recorded live from her home after hospitalization), and an episode of the show given over to some enthusiastic high-schoolers. The title of a Hafler Trio cassette culled from a broadcast on *Radio Code -Hotondo Kiki Torenai* [something you haven’t heard before]- accurately summed up the refreshing nature of the technically simple yet journalistically sophisticated approach.

Infiltrating the world of radio, holding deafening live sound performances, serving as a core member in an expanding circle of dissatisfied urban primitives: these accomplishments could have been enough on their own, but Duncan did not limit himself even to these things, branching out into film and television production as

well. His *John See* series of erotic / pornographic films may be some of the only films from the era (1986-1987) to involve a non-Japanese director at the helm. Duncan became involved in this medium with the assistance of Nobuyuki Nakagawa, a protégé of the avant-garde filmmaker Shuji Terayama. Needless to say, the results were an unorthodox based on collaged images (similar to the kind previously used in *Move Forward*) rather than the linear, clumsy attempts at 'acting' and 'narrative' that most porn films attempted. The *John See* soundtracks, likewise, were a world removed from the silly synthesizer percolations and ersatz funk typically scored for mild pornographic fare. Looped orgasmic noises, treated with electronics, gave the impression of being adrift and weightless in some limbo of carnal desire (see the piece *Breath Choir Mix*), while other soundtrack segments heightened erotic tension through ambient rumble and vaguely familiar, low-pitched rustlings and murmurings (*Inka*, *Aida Yuki Passion*.) Duncan's experiences within this corner of Japanese society featured human interactions significantly different than the ones portrayed in modern-day cautionary fables: rather than descending into a slimy netherworld of the type scripted into Hollywood docu-dramas, populated by Yakuza bosses, drug-addicted runaways and emotionally stunted nymphomaniacs, Duncan's colleagues on the filming set were reportedly very pleasant, and diversified in their reasons for working in adult films [for the sake of not repeating myself, readers should refer to the 'Pornoise' section of the chapter on Merzbow for further details on these encounters.]

Meanwhile, Duncan's pirate TVC 1 station –broadcast on the frequency of the state-operated NHK after their 'signing off' time- was a small victory for guerrilla media in an environment which increasingly accorded advertising as much importance as regular 'entertainment' programming. TVC 1 also functioned as a sort of companion piece to *Radio Code*. Fans of the media hijacking made so popular by the 'cyberpunk' genre (not least because Tokyo was the staging ground for the seminal writing in that genre) would find Duncan's actions positively romantic: a lone insurrectionary broadcasting from Tokyo rooftops with equipment that could fit securely into a single briefcase (antenna, transmitter and all), melting into the night and the nearest subway train before his location could be targeted by the authorities. Yet, for all this cool anti-hero romanticism, TVC 1 was less concerned with any kind of "fucking up the system" as it was with merely filling the gaps in what people were able to perceive through a broadcast medium: to wit, the station never interfered with any official NHK programming, and as such could project itself as an alluring alternative rather than as a chaotic interruption for its own sake. The intent was to be an 'additive' rather than subtractive form of communication- and among the additions made to Japanese culture were things which likely had never been seen in the whole of Asia: footage of Aktionist artist Rudolf Schwarzkogler, for one. Shaky production values merely contributed to the images' sense of otherness, as did the broadcasting of material whose originators had probably intended for it to remain private: play with a videocamera by a couple enjoying themselves after sex, or an

'accidental' set of artful visuals filmed by an electrical engineer in a small apartment.

---

<sup>1</sup> John Duncan, *Toshiji Mikawa- Radio Code* cassette side A, AQM, Amsterdam, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Zich, “Japan’s Sun Rises Over the Pacific”. *National Geographic*, November 1991, p.41. National Geographic Society, Washington DC.

<sup>4</sup> Takuya Sakaguchi, “Woofers, Choir, Radio, Religion and DumDum Boys”. *John Duncan: Works 1975-2005*, p. 21. Errant Bodies Press, Copenhagen 2006

<sup>5</sup> interviewed by the author, May 2006

<sup>6</sup> Michael Prime, “Explorations in Bioelectronics.” *Resonance* Vol. 9 No. 2, p. 17. London Musicians’ Collective, London, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*