Yukio FUJIMOTO Interview 2017.09.20 In his Studio, Kobe

1. Where does the title *Stars* come from?

Fujimoto: There are 54 songs, but only one note from each of them. Each note is unrelated to the others. That makes them like stars in the sky. When the piece produces sounds, the timing is not coordinated. So I thought it would just sound like notes randomly plinking away in 54 different places. When I first listened to it, the sounds were certainly separate and scattered. But I couldn't help connecting them in my head.
When you hear similar notes randomly occurring close together, making a little phrase like *da-da-da-dum* or *da-ding, da-ding*…If you have three notes, your brain will connect them – like connect-the-dots. That's our ability to compose music at work. We feel the need to make those connections. Even if we hear a bunch of totally random, unconnected sounds, we can't help but try and make sense of them. Once there is even a little sonic pattern, our brains take over and make that pattern, like composing music, although different people may hear different patterns.

It's similar to the way we invented constellations, where there are really just random stars. Humans can't help connecting stars with imaginary lines and saying, "There's a bird" or "There's a person." Our need to see pictures that aren't really there in the stars is like the way our brains process sounds. It's like there are 54 stars floating in the space, and the listeners can freely make their own sound constellations. That's why I called it *Stars*.
When you listen for a while, you start to hear patterns like composed melodies.

2. What makes a sound "good"?

Fujimoto: I often say, "Sound is not responsible for how we perceive it." We call sounds beautiful, healing, unpleasant, abrasive or whatever, but there is nothing intrinsic in the sounds themselves. It comes from the people who hear them. The same sound might be unpleasant one time, then pleasant another time. The sound doesn't change, but the listener does.

But in practice, I do sometimes think, "Oh, that's a *good* sound." That sound produces a pleasant sensation. And it's because of how I encounter the sound. When I have a positive encounter with a sound, it sounds good, but if I have a negative encounter with the same sound, it might sound unpleasant. You have to be aware that you're making these judgments, or your subjective perceptions can cause problems.

People talk about quiet environments as being good, but to me there's nothing more frightening than quiet. A totally soundless environment is terrifying to me. I can't bear it. Maybe that's why I'm not too picky about sounds.
I focus more on spaces. When sound reverberates in a space with really high ceilings, or a really large space, the sound paints a picture of the space. I think listening to sounds is really listening to space. We use words like *presence* to describe this. But it's about how the sound acts in the space, so we should call it *reverberation*.

3. Where do you draw the line (if any) between "sound" and "music"?

Fujimoto: It's a question of where "music" comes from. One thing I learned from making sound-art objects is, music is made by the listener. You can have the same sound playing, and to one person it is just noise, but to another it sounds like music.
If you're walking around town, you might hear doors slamming here and there, *bang* here, *boom* there, cars going *vroom*, in a way that connects into a rhythm. Busy people don't notice it, but people with nothing to do tune into it and say, "That's a nice rhythm." To them it sounds like music, whereas it just sounds like noises to people with things on their minds. Many people today still hear early 20th-century music by someone like Schönberg and say, "That doesn't sound like music, music needs *cohesion*, and this doesn't have it." But rather than it "not being music," they're just sounds that don't sound like music to that person. The listener defines what music is.

4. On interactive works

Fujimoto: When I hear "interactive," I think it usually means using electronic devices, switches, etc.

Like, you wave your hand and a sensor reacts.
Fujimoto: Or you place something on something else. You move something and something else moves. In any case, it's all done with technology.

But for you the scope of "interactive" goes beyond that?
Fujimoto: That's right.

It's not just about using technologies.

Fujimoto: Yes, I think everything in our daily lives is interactive. Turning the pages of a book or eating something. Our everyday behavior is all interactive. Say you're walking over dead leaves on the ground. Everyone has done that, and I don't think anyone hears those sounds as music. We take it for granted that this makes sounds. But if you spread dead leaves out on the floor of a gallery, and give people that experience in isolation, they start to hear the sounds in a different way. When you hear the volume and rhythm of the sound change depending on how you walk, you realize that when you walk over dead leaves every day, you're not just *listening* to the sounds, you're *performing* them. And maybe you realize that living your life is the same as composing and performing music.

5. What does time mean to you?

Fujimoto: In the old days, art was "spatial" and music " temporal." But early in the 20th century Einstein developed the theory of relativity, and we started talking about the space-time continuum, not space and time as separate things. But although we should be thinking this way all the time, we still tend to talk about "time" and "space" like two different entities. I wonder why that is. I guess what makes time and space separate entities is not what time *is*, it's how we perceive it. I realized this back in university, when I was told by an authority on electronic music, "Sight is integral calculus, and hearing is differential calculus." I had no idea what he meant, and he could see it on my face. "This kid doesn't get it." So he gave me an eye-opening example. Think of a video: When you push the Play button, the image is moving, and you can hear sound. When you press Pause, the image stops moving and the sound disappears.

"Integral calculus" means reducing the video to a series of still frames, like a flipbook, no matter where you pause it, you'll have a single still image. But if you stop the sound, you don't get a single sound resonating, you get nothing. That's because sound is "differential calculus." It doesn't exist without change. It struck me that "time" really means "change." It was quite an insight.

Change is what makes us perceive time passing. If the environment is static, you lose your sense of time. If the sun were always right overhead, we wouldn't have a 24-hour cycle. In fact, I wonder if we would have a concept of time at all. Our perception of time is totally affected by whether something changes gradually, or drastically. That's why I'm so interested in change.

6. How led you to make things that deal with words as part of your work with sound?

Fujimoto: Words are actually music too. That's why I almost never use Japanese. I decided that since the alphabet and musical notes both use letters, I could create various meanings by simply rearranging the 26 letters of the alphabet. Just as you make different patterns like do-re-mi, re-mi-do, and mi-re-do, you can compose music as if you were playing a game.

If I had used Japanese, people would have thought about the meaning of the characters and other things. But with English, you don't think about that kind of thing. That way you can just use the letters as symbols. If I was a native English speaker, I probably wouldn't be able to treat the letters so lightly, but for me it's really a kind of play.

At the same time, there is something special about the fact that when the letters A, R, and T are put together, they form the word "art." That's what makes words interesting. They are never completely without meaning, but at the same time we can't completely understand them. So if you're slightly detached, you can do something with the alphabet. But what's interesting about words is that in the end some kind of meaning always emerges.

What originally inspired you to use words? You started doing that quite early on, right?

Fujimoto: I think I saw it as a kind of extension of a crossword puzzle. Like, why do you end up with a different word when you rearrange the same group of letters? It wasn't that I really set out to make a work with words. It started out as a kind of game.

I also thought about how people like James Joyce and Raymond Roussel had done similar things. And how Marcel Duchamp was so fond of puns. That also had an effect on me.

In that case, you might say that dealing with sound and dealing with words or letters comes from the same place.

Fujimoto: Exactly the same place.

That's interesting, isn't it?

Fujimoto: What's interesting is not what kind of idea or image you can express with words, but what emerges when you line them up. That's why it makes perfect sense that Roussel created a novel based on the notion that he could change the meaning by simply replacing B with P.

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