

The Voice Recomposed

A Lost Tape-Recorder Poem of Postwar Japan

On September 30, 1953, a new kind of poetry premiered on an empty stage in the heart of Tokyo. A grand piano, keys covered, sat next to a speaker, rectangular wooden lattices seemingly floating before them; spotlights and floodlights created stark geometries of illumination and shadow.¹ From the speaker, and others like it positioned throughout the concert hall, came two voices—a woman’s and a man’s—which began to read surreal, hypnotic phrases in a precise rhythm: “*shōjo wa pin o otoshita/yoru no suna no naka no kuroi ke/yoru no suna no naka no kuroi ke/yoru no suna no naka no kuroi ke*” (the girl dropped a pin/black hair in the sand of night/black hair in the sand of night/black hair in the sand of night).² Over the course of the poem’s thirty-six parts, these voices were multiplied and fragmented, echoed and reversed, layered, amplified, and finally silenced.

This was the first and only performance of “Poem for Tape Recorder: Composition B—Imprisoned Woman” (“Tēpu rekōdā no tame no shi: Sakuhin B—Torawareta onna”), by the poet, composer, and music critic Akiyama Kuni-haru (1929–96). It was held in the middle of the Experimental Workshop’s 5th Exhibition (Jikken Kōbō daigokai happyōkai), an event held at Dai-ichi Seimei Hall, a concert venue established just the year before on the sixth floor of the building that had housed the headquarters of the Allied occupation of Japan from Japan’s defeat in World War II until 1951. Jikken Kōbō, or the Experimental Workshop, was a Tokyo-based collective of fourteen young visual artists, composers, engineers, lighting designers, and poets, including Akiyama. They came together near the end of the occupation, with their artistic activities spanning from 1951 to 1957. Though the term “intermedia” did not come into use until the latter half of the 1960s, their events—which combined recitals, gallery exhibitions, screenings,

poetry readings, and theatrical productions—embodied that ethos, freely mingling highly experimental works across multiple disciplines and taking full advantage of cutting-edge developments in media technology.

The 5th Exhibition was perhaps Jikken Kōbō's fullest expression of their point of view. Several experimental compositions premiered at the same event, including Matsuura Tomiaki performing Takemitsu Tōru's piano piece "La Pause Interrompue," based on a poem by the surrealist poet Takiguchi Shūzō; Takiguchi himself wrote an essay introducing the concert in the program. Four "Auto-Slide Works" ("Ōto-suraido sakuhin"), the first of their kind in the world, used the titular new technology—an automated slide projector synced up to a magnetic tape recorder, which was provided to them by Tōkyō Tsūshin Kōgyō (now called Sony) for demo purposes—to combine photographs of abstract sculptures, sets, and paintings with recordings of music (chamber and concrete) and readings of poems written by Fukushima Hideko and the Venezuelan writer Robert Ganzo. In the midst of these was another world first, this one using Japan's first magnetic tape recorder, Tōkyō Tsūshin Kōgyō's "G-Type" (created less than three years earlier): the premiere of two "Poems for Tape Recorder" by Akiyama Kuniharu. "Composition B: Imprisoned Woman" now exists only in the form of a script; "Composition A" is entirely lost.

Though they are now better known for their works of visual art, what lay at the heart of the 5th Exhibition and much of Jikken Kōbō's output more generally was the intersection of poetry with sound, or, more accurately, with a variety of sonic practices: reading aloud, recording, composition, and scoring. In fact, this can be taken beyond Jikken Kōbō: in the avant-garde of Japan's postwar and particularly the 1950s and '60s, poetic practices consistently drew from sonic practices to remake the media landscape through the logics of composition and performance, using an expanded notion of writing in which bodies, materials, and sensations could themselves be "scored." As a description of the poems for tape recorder from the 5th Exhibition program—likely written by Akiyama himself—put it, "The poetry of today is all print poetry [*insatsu-shi*], but here we have sought tools of poetic expression [*shiteki hyōgen no dōgu*] within the sonic properties of language in an attempt to consider these new mechanisms as processes of *poésie*."³

This chapter will be an intensive look at Akiyama Kuniharu's second tape-recorder poem as a case study of how poets in postwar Japan used sonic forms, practices, and technologies in order to rethink expressive media in an expanded field and recompose the poetic "voice" in an extraordinarily fraught era. Some poets, like Akiyama, made full use of the cutting-edge media technologies of this time, taking advantage of dramatic new developments in personal audio recording. Some created poetic works that evoked sound in open-ended, nondeterministic ways that ran directly counter to the tape recorder's promises of perfect capture

and playback, particularly of the human voice. But this relationship to *the sonic* remained central. I say “the sonic” instead of “sound” deliberately, in a way that parallels the last chapter’s use of “the cinematic.” The sonic encompasses not just sound—which is itself far from an uncomplicated, given phenomenon, as will be discussed—but also the practices, institutions, cultures, and technologies associated with its production, composition, reception, inscription, and circulation.

The conventional history of poetry in postwar Japan tends to be some variation on the following: During the Pacific War, many poets were imprisoned for reasons such as communist sympathies (real or imagined) or membership in anarchist groups; poets either stopped writing or, more commonly, wrote propagandistic pieces in support of the Japanese empire, which were often read aloud in massive poetry reading events and on radio broadcasts. After Japan’s defeat in 1945, and during and subsequent to its occupation by largely American forces until 1952, many poets—the ones who survived, that is—either reemerged after a long silence or expressed regret for their role in the war, though of course some did not. The first prominent postwar poetry journal and coterie was *Wasteland* (*Arechi*), which was formed in the late 1940s with poets such as Tamura Ryūichi, who wrote grim, unadorned poems in the wake of brutality and suffering. “Atomic bomb poems” by poet survivors like Tōge Sankichi were also highly influential. The 1950s saw the emergence of journals like the lyrical *Oar* (*Kai*), which featured still-famous poets like Tanikawa Shuntarō and the late Ōoka Makoto, as well as what is often called a neo-Surrealist movement centered around the journal *Crocodile* (*Wani*), which featured poets such as Yoshioka Minoru, Iijima Kōichi and Ōoka.⁴ The 1950s and ’60s also saw women poets become more prominent than ever before in the modern era, with collections by Ibaragi Noriko (who cofounded *Kai*), Ishigaki Rin, Tomioka Taeko, and Yoshihara Sachiko gaining widespread acclaim for their poetic depictions of daily life, a critical box within which women poets were largely placed until the 1970s.

None of this is inaccurate, but there is another story of poetic practice at this time, one that goes far beyond the poems that happened to be published in poetry journals and then collected into books. Starting in the 1950s—and flourishing in the 1960s—what we find within and outside Japan is a dramatically expanded field of poetic practice that consisted of works both on and off the page. Many of these works might not be immediately recognizable as poems at first, despite all of them being explicitly called poems, using either the Japanese term *shi* or sometimes *poemu* (the Japanese rendition of the English “poem” or the French “poème”). Yet more significant than the definitional question of whether or not these works are “really” poems is the task of capturing how poetry enabled the active questioning of norms, boundaries, and forms that these poets and their works engaged in. In other words, not “what is poetry?” but “why were these called poems?” Not “is this literature?” but “what are the implications of a literariness that looks like this?” In this chapter we will focus on this version of literariness, intimately engaged

with technology and the body, decentering printed text, and developed first and foremost in conversation with sonic practices.

The context in which Akiyama composed these “Poems for Tape Recorder” was this worldwide postwar movement toward boundary-breaking artistic works. Emerging across the globe in the 1950s and reaching full bloom in the 1960s, the neo-avant-garde was an unfolding of experimental artistic practices, often centered around collectives of practitioners. There was a return to the movements, modes, and aesthetics of the modernisms of the early twentieth century, with many figures and groups drawing direct inspiration from Dada, Futurism, Surrealism, and so on. But there was also an intense dedication to creating entirely new types of art—to not just working across different disciplines and media, but also to questioning the ontological bases of those media themselves, as well as the distinctions between them. Unlike in the prewar era, however, poets from Japan were now active and recognized participants in these global experimental movements, often using multiple languages in their work. Art collectives and institutions—such as Jikken Kōbō, Hi-Red Center, Gutai, the Sōgetsu Art Center, VOU, Provoke, ASA, and Fluxus, in the case of Japan—continuously rejected the traditional boundaries between media and disciplines, the professional and the amateur, the national and the global, and even between the art world and the everyday in favor of something more fluid and unruly. Within this context, “poems” were often composed not just beyond the page but even beyond language, with poetic practice pushing against and through the boundaries of media forms and technologies, giving rise to a flourishing of film poems, concrete poems, sound poems, instrumental poems, sculpture poems, action poems, movement poems, photographic poems, and theater poems. The poetic became not a literary subgenre but *a stance toward composition*, an indication of a heightened focus on cross-media creation and sensorial experimentation.

It is difficult to overstate the enormous density of this kind of poetic practice from the 1950s and 1960s avant-garde, and the profligacy of interconnections and collaborations by writers, composers, artists, performers, filmmakers, and so on within and beyond Japan. In these two decades alone, one might have encountered works like Jikken Kōbō’s aforementioned auto-slide poems (1953); Yoko Ono’s instructional poems and expanded compositions, such as those in the bilingual English and Japanese book *Grapefruit* (1964); Niikuni Seiichi’s book of “phonetic poems” (*onseishi*) and music-inspired concrete poems (*gutaishi*), *Zero-on* (1963); Matsumoto Toshio’s three documentary shorts, “Poem of a Stone” (“Ishi no uta,” 1963, with a soundtrack by Akiyama), “Nishijin” (1961), and “Mothers” (“Haha-tachi,” 1967), which were regularly referred to as film-poems (*eigashi*); the poet Tanikawa Shuntarō and the composer Takemitsu Tōru’s collaboration “Vocalism A•I” (1956), which was later made into an experimental animation by Kuri Yōji (1963); Kanno Seiko’s “semiotic poems” (*kigōshi*) of dueling abstract shapes

(1965–66); Moroi Makoto and Abe Kōbō's musical poetic drama (*ongaku shigeki*) "Red Cocoon" ("Akai mayu"), which was both performed live and broadcast on radio (1960); Hayashi Hikaru's chamber music pieces based on poems by Kaneko Mitsuharu (1960); the jazz poems (*jazu shi*) of Tanikawa, Terayama Shūji, and Iwata Hiroshi (early '60s); Shiomi Mieko's "Spatial Poems," which involved people across the world performing tasks based on scores she mailed to them (starting in 1965); Kusano Shimpei's 1955 "Poetry Collection for Microphone" ("Maikurofon no tame no shishū"), recorded on tape (now lost); Kitasono Katue's arrangements of photographed objects he called "plastic poems" (*purasutikku poemu*), beginning in 1966; and Ichiyanagi Toshi's experimental graphic music scores arranged in poetic stanzas (1961).

"Intermedia" later came to be a keyword used to describe this shared ethos of avant-garde artistic production. Dick Higgins, an American poet and one of the founders of Fluxus—the international experimental art network with several members from Japan—first coined the term in a 1965 essay of the same name, and he elaborated on the concept in his 1966 "Statement on Intermedia":

For the last ten years or so, artists have changed their media to suit this situation, to the point where the media have broken down in their traditional forms, and have become merely puristic points of reference. The idea has arisen, as if by spontaneous combustion throughout the entire world, that these points are arbitrary and only useful as critical tools, *in saying that such-and-such a work is basically musical, but also poetry*. This is the intermedial approach, to emphasize the dialectic between the media. A composer is a dead man unless he composes for all the media and for his world.⁵

Expanding upon this, Shiomi Mieko, artist, composer, and member of Fluxus, also placed the intertwining of poetry and the sonic at the center of the phenomenon, describing her understanding of intermedia as "the form of expression which falls between the existing genres such as poetry and music, for example, vocal poem or visual poem."⁶ Again, we see that at the core of the flourishing of intermedia works is an expanded conception of "writing" emerging at the intersection of poetry with sonic practices such as composition, music, sound art, scoring, vocal performance, and recording.

This intersection, which at first seems to be a minor aspect of the maelstrom of artistic movements at this time—and which has been treated as such in the ensuing decades—strikes at the heart of postwar innovations within expressive culture whose impact can be felt to this day. Each of the works mentioned not only staged an encounter between poetry and multiple media but also used the poetic as a tool to rethink media and the relation between them, specifically through sonic materials and practices. In other words, in an era when intermedia works explored and exploded the boundaries between conventional artistic

disciplines, the sonic and the poetic regularly played a central role, intertwined as if in a double helix. With that said, let us return to the extant “Poem for Tape Recorder”—a composition that simultaneously spectacularized its existence as a work of literature and a sonic media object, and which must be analyzed as both—as well as its creator Akiyama Kuniharu and the collective Jikken Kōbō, in which he played a central role.

AKIYAMA KUNIHARU AND THE EXPERIMENTAL WORKSHOP

With a performance at Tokyo’s Picasso Festival of the elaborate avant-garde ballet *The Joy of Life* (*Ikiru yorokobi*), the pioneering artistic group Jikken Kōbō (Experimental Workshop) was founded in Tokyo in 1951, a year before the end of the postwar Allied occupation of Japan. Despite the name, they were a collective of practitioners—not a physical institution—and they remained a named entity until 1957. Most of the group’s members continued to be active and influential within Japan’s cutting-edge art and music scenes well into the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond. Ishida Kazushi describes them as “a group of young artists [who] came together to carry out poetic experiments with a creative spirit, crossing the lines between music, art, and literature.”⁷ Unlike most established artistic organizations in Japan at the time, which were highly hierarchical and focused on single artistic disciplines, Jikken Kōbō was a true collective, endlessly collaborating inside and outside of the group to create ambitious gallery exhibitions, recitals, and performances that aimed to dismantle the boundaries between conventional media.⁸ After Akiyama rediscovered a letter he had written to John Cage in 1952—in self-described poor English, asking him for sheet music to perform at Jikken Kōbō’s 4th Exhibition—he reflected on his time as part of the group, when he and the other members actively aimed to open up Japan and its art scene to global artistic movements: “Thinking back, there was almost no exchange between Japan and the outside world during that period [the immediate postwar era]. Experimental Workshop opened a ventilating hole in the closed Japanese art world of the time by its own efforts, and attempted by any means possible to make direct contact with new movements of the period. All the members were young, just barely turned twenty. And they were all bound closely together in the task of seeking this new spirit.”⁹

The Surrealist poet and art critic Takiguchi Shūzō—who, like the figures discussed in chapter 1, also wrote works of cinempoetry—took on a new role in the postwar era as an enormously influential impresario and hub around which experimental artistic practice flourished. He gave Jikken Kōbō their name—echoing his own prewar *shiteki jikken*, “poetic experiments”—and served as the group’s spiritual godfather.¹⁰ The group itself consisted of fourteen members with a variety of highly nonrigid specializations, almost all of whom were Tokyoites

in their twenties: the painter/sculptor/photographer Kitadai Shōzō (1921–2001), the painter/costume designer/poet Fukushima Hideko (1927–97), and the painter/sculptor Yamaguchi Katsuhiro (1928–2018); the composers Yuasa Jōji (1929–2024), Satō Keijirō (1927–2009), Suzuki Hiroyoshi (1930–2006), Fukushima Kazuo (1930–2023), and Takemitsu Tōru (1930–1996), who remains Japan’s most renowned modern composer; the pianist Sonoda Takahiro (1928–2004); the photographer Ōtsuji Kiyoji (1923–2001); the lighting designer Imai Naoji (1928–); the engineer Yamazaki Hideo (1920–1979); and, finally, Akiyama Kuniharu (1929–96).¹¹

Akiyama Kuniharu is now largely known for having been one of the most prominent and influential music critics in postwar Japan, particularly in his introduction of modern and avant-garde classical music to a wider audience with books like 1973’s *How Should One Listen to Contemporary Music?* and his works on postwar Japanese composition such as *A History of Japanese Film Music* in 1974 and the two-volume *Japan’s Composers: From the Postwar to a True Postwar Future* in 1978.¹² At the time of Jikken Kōbō’s founding, however, Akiyama was twenty-two years old and enrolled in Waseda University’s program in French literature, focusing on Surrealist poetry. Soon after the end of the Second World War, the Allied occupation General Headquarters (GHQ) opened the Civilian Information and Education (CIE) Library in the Hibiya area of Tokyo, which held well-attended weekly “record concerts” where the staff played new (largely classical, and often avant-garde) music releases on a turntable.¹³ Akiyama was an assistant at the library—as well as for its concerts and lecture series—which proved to be the central location where most of the members of what was to become Jikken Kōbō first met.¹⁴ He continued to play a key role within Jikken Kōbō throughout its existence, regularly serving as a go-between among Jikken Kōbō’s visual artists and composers and weaving together disparate visions into coherent productions.

Yet unlike the other members of the group, Akiyama did not consider himself as a visual artist, designer, or composer. Within and outside the activities of Jikken Kōbō, he consistently described himself in one way—as a poet. While this might not seem especially remarkable, Akiyama differed from other poets in one very significant way: he did not write any poems. None, at least, that were recognized as such by the poetic communities of the time; not a single one of his poems was ever published in a poetry journal, book, or anthology during his lifetime. Yet—highly inspired by his mentor Takiguchi—Akiyama considered being a poet the central part of his identity, and all of his activities were inflected by it.¹⁵ He, more than anyone, embraced Takiguchi’s idea that poetry is a form of experimentation in an expanded media field, *including but not limited to* literary expression. This central tenet of Jikken Kōbō’s activities was recounted several decades later by the group member and experimental visual artist Yamaguchi Katsuhiro in his consideration of the relationship between Takiguchi’s self-described prewar

“poetic experiments” and the postwar Experimental Workshop that he named and guided:

This name [Jikken Kōbō/Experimental Workshop], picked by Takiguchi for a group of young people just over twenty years of age forty years ago, was significant because it expressed his own position of denying the commonsense realm of linguistic expression in poetry. Actually, he seems to imply that one of the territories of the experimental spirit is the territory of poetry. Verbal expression was naturally very important for Takiguchi, but the territory which he was targeting for experimental action included a wide variety of artistic activities. Each of these activities could be taken beyond its own area of specialization through new methods and approaches to interact with other activities. Considered [*sic*] the matter in this way, it is easy to understand why Takiguchi selected the word poetic. It is even easier to understand why he selected the name “Experimental Workshop,” and in retrospect we see what great expectations he placed on these words.¹⁶

Takiguchi, then, envisioned Jikken Kōbō as a collaborative poetic project in an expanded sense; and if poetry was the artistic and spiritual tool by which the group could break down conventional divisions between disciplines and media, Akiyama was its main proponent. While he defined himself as a “poet,” Akiyama was also often identified as a composer, though again, not in a traditional sense; unlike the other composers in the group, he did not write pieces for conventional instruments nor did he produce a single page of sheet music. Akiyama’s unconventional activities as both poet and composer were referenced in a later interview with composer and fellow Jikken Kōbō member Yuasa Jōji:

Matsui Shigeru: Did [Akiyama] often publish poems at the time?

Yuasa: It’s not that he published a lot as a poet, but he wrote poems every now and then. When we were using the auto-slide, he wrote a poem about “the egg of the moon” or something like that. The egg of the moon might have come from Takiguchi.

Matsui: Akiyama composed things like sound poems for tape recorders, but did he ever write anything with traditional staff notation?

Yuasa: No, nothing like that. He wasn’t that kind of composer.¹⁷

Indeed, in almost every Jikken Kōbō production Akiyama could be found actively infusing the proceedings with a poetic sensibility, providing lyrics to performances and poetic notes for programs along with composing his own intermedia poetic works. Mizusawa Tsutomu, for example, notes that an untitled poem of Akiyama’s was used in Jikken Kōbō’s very first event, *The Joy of Life* ballet, during which, at one point, the music stopped and his text was read aloud. The text of the poem was highly marked up for specific effects in its performance: “The original Japanese features phonetic annotations telling readers how to pronounce a few of the words, which seem unnecessary in some cases,” says Mizusawa, “but we can conclude that they are a device to help regulate the rhythm of the reading.”¹⁸

From the group's inception, Akiyama thus put thoughtfully performed poetic text figuratively and literally on center stage.

JIKKEN KŌBŌ'S 5TH EXHIBITION AND THE "G-TYPE" TAPE RECORDER

This was never clearer than in Jikken Kōbō's 5th Exhibition, at which Akiyama debuted two "Poems for Tape Recorder," "Composition A" ("Sakuhin A") and "Composition B: Imprisoned Woman" ("Sakuhin B: Torawareta onna"). As described above, the work premiered upon an empty stage (but with a packed audience) and consisted of sounds coming out of speakers arranged around Dai-ichi Seimei Hall. Unfortunately, despite all we know about these works, there is just as much we do not. "Composition A" is completely lost; the tape itself and the script, if there was one, have disappeared, leaving only the knowledge that it may have been twenty-three minutes long and may have involved two narrators, the actors Akutagawa Hiroshi and Wakayama Asaka.¹⁹ According to the event's program, those two actors certainly provided the narration for the *second* work, "Composition B: Imprisoned Woman," though no recording remains. Two of Akiyama's handwritten scripts, however, each twenty pages in length and divided into thirty-six parts, are still extant. According to Miwako Tezuka, the narrated text was recorded in advance, after which Akiyama manipulated the tape(s), editing it (or them) and adding effects like reversal, layering, and fast-forwarding.²⁰ During the live performance, she says, Akiyama "controlled the switchboard of the speakers" offstage, "as if conducting a mechanical orchestra playing polyphonic music from behind the scene."²¹

This was a startling and novel experience for the Tokyo audience, as these kinds of manipulated tape experiments only became technologically feasible with the introduction of consumer tape recorders just a short while before in the late 1940s, at which point they were not yet available in Japan. It was around that time that the French composer Pierre Schaeffer first created what he called *musique concrète*, which was made through the manipulation of various sounds recorded onto tape, the Egyptian composer Halim El-Dabh created original works using tape recordings of local ceremonies as raw material, and the American composer John Cage performed his own tape music experiments. Among the very earliest of tape compositions in Japan were these poems by Akiyama, which were pioneering not only because they were the first poems composed specifically for tape recorder (and its capacities for sonic manipulation) in Japan, but also because they were quite possibly the first such poems in the world. Steve McCaffery, experimental poet and one of the foremost historians of sonic and visual poetry, points toward the French poet Henri Chopin's experiments with *poésie sonore* and *audio-poèmes* starting in 1955 as "the first ever poetry to be entirely dependent on the tape," yet Akiyama's works premiered two years earlier.²²

Although vinyl phonographic records were widespread in the mid-twentieth century, the equipment for recording them was prohibitively expensive and out of the reach of most consumers. In the mid-1950s, however, tape recording not only

became a relatively inexpensive way to capture sound, allowing for consumers to become producers of recordings, but it also provided the new functionalities of easy manipulation: splicing, erasure, rerecording, and more.²³ The availability of consumer magnetic tape recorders meant that poets became able to hear their own voices, most for the first time, offering new possibilities to reemphasize the orality of poetry.

At the beginning or even slightly preceding this trend in Japan was the “G-Type” tape recorder created in 1950 by Sony (then known as Tōkyō Tsūshin Kōgyō), the first tape recorder made in Japan. It was about two feet wide and quite heavy—at about eighty pounds, it took two people to lift—but it was portable, with handles on each side, a speaker in the front for playback, three dials for volume and tape speed adjustment, and two magnetic tape reels on top. Although plastic-based magnetic tape was more conventional, the lack of development of Japan’s plastics industries at the time meant that the G-Type’s magnetic tape was made of magnetite dust painted onto paper. The “G” stood for “government”; the technology was not intended for personal use but for courts and various government agencies.²⁴ Following the recommendation of Takiguchi, these tape recorders (along with the auto-slide machines mentioned earlier) were entrusted by Sony to the young members of Jikken Kōbō to use in their works earlier than the general population had access to them, the company hoping that their innovative performances would showcase the capabilities of the new technologies to a wider audience before their release as consumer products.

Akiyama’s fellow Jikken Kōbō member Yuasa Jōji sheds some light on how these works came to be, with an emphasis on the shock of hearing the capabilities of tape recorders for the first time:

After being introduced by someone from Yomiuri, we went to the studio of Tōkyō Tsūshin Kōgyō in Gotanda. At that time there wasn’t anything but monoaural tape, so we borrowed three tape recorders. . . . With tape it was easy to play things in reverse, and there we heard that for the first time in our lives. It was a huge shock—an amazing new experience. We wanted to use them and didn’t have any of the equipment. At that time, tape recorders could slow things down to half speed. If you did that, it would lower it down an octave. But only half speed was boring, so using different sizes of spindles we could drop it down to a third. Of course, you could also reverse things and wrap the tape around the spindles to distort it, creating fluctuations (“wow”). It began as a very rudimentary thing.²⁵

AKIYAMA’S “POEM FOR TAPE RECORDER”

The first artistic works to make full use of these “shocking” capacities of the G-Type tape recorder were Akiyama’s two 1953 “Poems for Tape Recorder.” As mentioned before, however, little remains of them—nothing at all in the case of “Composition A,” and two nearly identical handwritten scripts, but no recording, for “Composition B: Imprisoned Woman.” The scripts include a lengthy poetic text along

with sparse penciled-in notes with minutes and seconds (likely indicating the time elapsed at that point on the tape), large capital letters seemingly partitioning the text into different roles, and instructions to speed up or slow down the tempo, use echo effects, reverse the recording, and so on.

There are some, albeit few, descriptions of the premiere of these poems at Jikken Kōbō's 5th Exhibition. Akiyama himself, for example, reflected on the works several decades later: "I manipulated the functions of this recording device to create 'Sound Poem for Tape Recorder,' Composition A, and Composition B, 'Imprisoned Woman.' In this world-first attempt at joining together of electronic technology and poetry, fierce sound poems were made to resound throughout the space of the hall."²⁶ He, perhaps only retroactively, recognized his achievement as a "world first," not just in combining poetry and tape recording but also in the very "joining together of electronic technology and poetry" (*denshi tekunoroji to shi no ketsugō*).²⁷ He also refers to his works as "sound poems" (*onkyōshi*), a term he did not use at the time of their composition but which gained purchase in the subsequent decade with sound poetry works in Japan by figures such as Niikuni Seiichi and the increasing attention paid to pioneering prewar sound poetry compositions such as those by the German Dadaist poet Kurt Schwitters, an exhibition of whose work was held in Tokyo in the Nihonbashi Minami Garō gallery in 1960.²⁸

Tagiguchi Shūzō wrote an essay in the 5th Exhibition's program describing the works to be premiered, including Akiyama's poems for tape recorder: "It goes without saying that the tape recorder presents us with new possibilities for the conception and expression of music, but I also think these 'Poems for Tape Recorder' are experiments to which we should pay attention. In short, we should not be cowardly about new statements, machines, and so on—we must make the hands and voices of the 'human' permeate them in all respects. Is this not one of the biggest challenges for artists as we head into the latter half of the twentieth century?"²⁹ Here Tagiguchi emphasizes the experimental nature of these poems, not just in their use of technology in combination with literary practice, but in the way they infuse new technologies with a firmly human subjectivity, something he clearly sees as an urgent project.

The sole contemporary description of the poems for tape recorder other than in the event's program, however, comes from an unattributed article in the newspaper *Yorozu chōhō*, "Performance of 'Imprisoned Woman': Poem through Tape Recorder—Jikken Kōbō's New Experiment."³⁰ The article is a preview and not a review of the 5th Exhibition, published on September 29, 1953, the day before the exhibition; it is unclear whether the author actually heard a preview of the piece or if they used descriptions of what the piece *would* be like provided by Akiyama himself. Nevertheless, it is a striking description:

The "Poems for Tape Recorder" and "Projective Art through Slides and Sounds"—to be presented at Dai-ichi Seimei Hall tomorrow, September 30 (6:30 p.m.)—are

drawing attention from figures in the arts, music, and theater as the first experiments in Japan to bring in modern mechanisms into the field of audio-visual arts. . . . Of the previously mentioned poems for tape recorder, Akiyama Kuniharu's "Imprisoned Woman" will be delivered through the readings of Akutagawa Hiroshi, Wakayama Asaka, Tamura Toshio, and others. The work has the aim of playing back recorded tape with purely musical effects achieved through reversals, technical adjustments of rotation speed, and so on; with Akutagawa's voice as the main element, just three or four people reading aloud gradually become motifs layered upon one another like in Ravel's "Boléro," creating polyphonic harmonies like in symphonic music.³¹

This article does not shed any light on the mysterious "Composition A," focusing entirely on "Composition B: Imprisoned Woman." It is the only document to describe three narrators—only the first two are credited in the 5th Exhibition's program—and, as evident by the comparison to Maurice Ravel's "Boléro," it indicates a structure in which more and more voices are layered on top of one another in a long march towards increasing intensity.

At the same time, even though the significance of these poems for tape recorder was recognized early on, there is much we do not know about the actual experience of the works in Dai-ichi Seimei Hall. An English-language timeline of electronic music history published in 1968, for example, contains the following entry: "A group of composers establishes 'Jikken Kobo' (Experimental Laboratory), using equipment furnished by the Sony Corporation. Works included *Toraware no onna* [sic] (*Imprisoned Woman*, tape poem, 1951, 23') and *Piece B* (tape poem, 1951, 10') by Kuniharu Akiyama (b. Japan, 1929—both his works are lost)."³² In this entry, Akiyama's works are already deemed "lost," their date of creation is listed as 1951 instead of 1953, and a single piece is mistakenly represented as two: "Torawareta onna" is separated from "Piece B," with no mention of a Piece/Composition A. There are also several quite basic facts we do not know about Akiyama's poems: Was there one tape recorder involved, or multiple? Did the multiple speakers each play a single recording, or did different voices and sounds come out of each speaker? How much of the work was premanipulated, and how many of the effects were added in live by Akiyama? Which portions of the text were easily understandable to the audience, and which, due to layering of several voices, fast-forwarding, distortion, and so on, were not? Does the *Yorozu chōhō* article describing the work as achieving "purely musical effects" (*jun'ongaku-teki na kōka*) indicate that the majority of the piece was (mis)understood by the audience not as a composition of language but of wordless sound? We also do not know how the text was read aloud, such as which parts were read by which of the two (or more) actors, what the tempo was, what the emotional tone was (what made Akiyama describe the poems as *shiretsu*, "fierece?"), and—with few exceptions—at what volume or with what rhythm it was performed.

Yet it is precisely this lack of information that makes "Composition B" an intriguing case study, one that sheds light on trends within postwar Japanese poetry that also apply to works that never took audio form. To use a term of Seth Kim-Cohen,

which I will return to later, this piece, as it exists now, is a firmly “non-cochlear” work of sonic poetry.³³ It is “silent” in that it only exists on the page and not as an audio recording; nor is there enough information for it to be easily recreated in performance, at least in a way closely resembling its original form (as there would be, for example, if it were sheet music for a piano composition). Yet it is also a work that is unquestionably “for tape recorder”—a poem that could only have been made possible in its engagement with the form and capacities of the new media technology of the G-Type recorder. On top of this, as we shall see, it incorporates structures and notation from the sonic practice of instrumental classical music, making it a hybrid of poem, script, and score. This allows for the contemporary reader to have an imagined sonic experience while reading it on the page, one that goes beyond an evocation of a voice reading aloud. In the previous chapter we saw how cinematic techniques—cuts, zooms, overlapping images, and so on—became techniques of *imagination* as well, with “cinapoets” making full use of them in their textual poetic works. Similarly, “audio” elements here become “non-cochlear,” divorced from the ear and the experience of hearing them, entering them into the realm of the imagined or conceptual; the emergence of the magnetic tape recorder introduced or crystallized sonic techniques like the fast forward, reverse audio, and echo, techniques that poets could then also evoke in written work.

These tendencies become clear as we turn to the poem itself. The title page for one of two handwritten manuscripts for “Composition B” can be seen in figure 1. In the upper right-hand corner is written the year of composition and performance, 1953. The first line is a subtitle in small text: “Tēpu rekōdā no tame no shi sakuhin B” (“Poem for Tape Recorder: Composition B”). This describes first the form of the work and then its numbering within the context of the rest of Akiyama’s works of the same type. With the use of *sakuhin*, which is also the usual Japanese rendering of “opus,” we already see a deliberate use of the conventions of musical composition, in this case the way in which classic pieces are titled—this, again, immediately signals that what follows is not just a poem or script but also a *score*. In large text at the center of the page is the name of the poem: “Torawareta onna,” which means “imprisoned woman.”³⁴ Finally, Akiyama’s own name is written in graphic, angular characters.

The piece is divided into thirty-six numbered sections, each page divided into four rows by horizontal lines. The thin upper row has the section numbers; the second row, a bit larger, is usually used for instructions for performance or recording manipulation, either scribbled in pencil or more permanently written in ink. The remainder of the page is taken up by two large rows of equal width where the poetic text is written. Each row seemingly indicates that one of two actors is to speak, though the actor is not specified. Although throughout most of the poem the text is usually in one of these rows, there are also pages where both rows are taken up by text, seeming to indicate that the actors are to read at the same time. As for the text itself, it is a lost Surrealist epic, quite unlike any other poems in

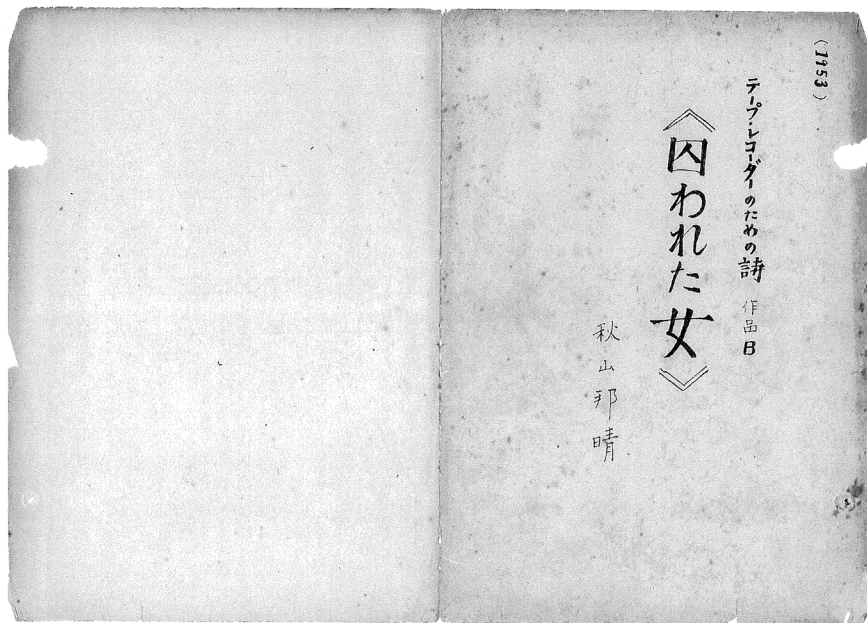


FIGURE 1. Title page for Akiyama Kuniharu's 1953 script for "Poem for Tape Recorder: Composition B—Imprisoned Woman" ("Tēpu rekōda no tame no shi: Sakuhin B—Torawareta onna"). Private collection.

Japanese written before this point; the titular "imprisoned woman" travels through and is caught within impossible landscapes where bodies, nature, and man-made structures continually fragment and mutate, with a hypnotic and obsessive repetition of certain images (mirrors, hair, stones, night, walls, wind).

Section 5—which, according to Akiyama's penciled-in notes in the upper right, begins 1 minute and 35 seconds into the tape—starts with two short lines, "walls of night/ sea of night" (*yoru no kabe/ yoru no umi*), above which is written a rhythmic gloss (figure 2). Three eighth notes are followed by a down arrow—likely representing a rest—one more eighth note, and a quarter note. This seems to indicate to the reader how these lines should be read—not with equal weight given to all five syllables, but with a pause after each "*yoru no*" (of night) and a lingering on the final syllable. The unusually large gap after each "*no*" in the text might also cause this reader to pause, consciously or subconsciously, while reading the poem aloud or in their head; in this hybrid poem-score, however, Akiyama has the freedom to make these implicit rhythmic gestures explicit by incorporating conventionally "musical" notation. This is combined with his own unique notation, visible in the crosshatched square in the upper left containing the characters for "breath sound"; this seems to be an instruction to layer the sound of someone breathing over the line of dialogue below.

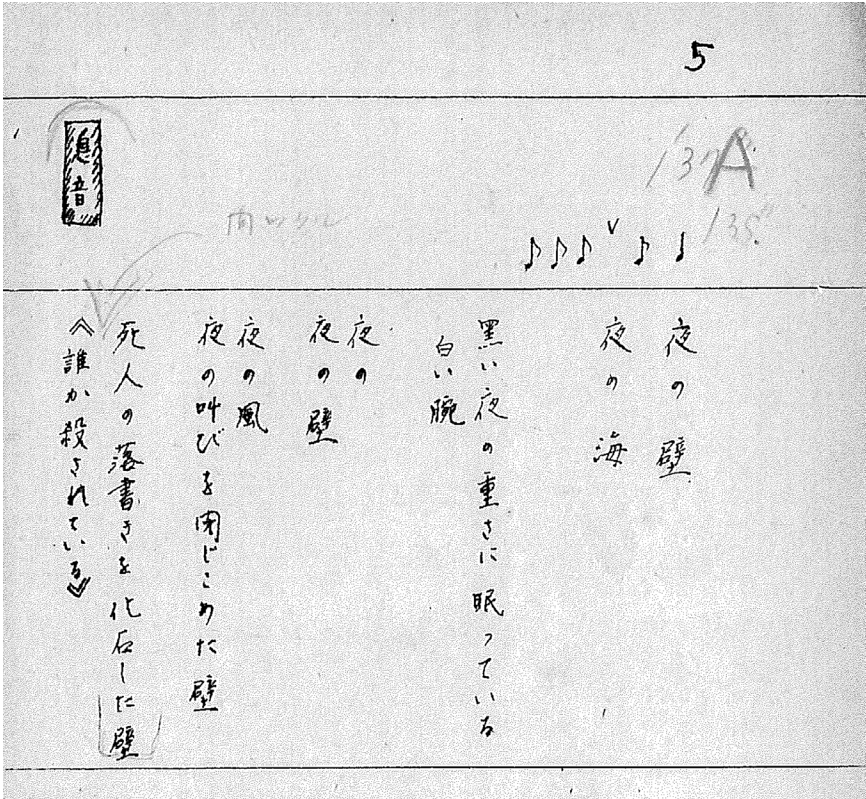


FIGURE 2. Rhythmic guide for spoken syllables from Akiyama Kuniharu's 1953 script for "Poem for Tape Recorder: Composition B—Imprisoned Woman." Private collection.

The poetic text within figure 2 is also representative—in tone, structure, and imagery—of the majority of the work:

walls of night
sea of night

sleeping in the weight of the black night
a white arm

of night
walls of night

wind of night
wall that held in the screams of night
walls that fossilized the graffiti of the dead
"someone is being killed"

In section 14, around five minutes into the piece, something startling happens (figure 3). In pen, in the central row, an underlined stanza is written in capital roman letters (the only time this happens in the poem), with exaggerated spaces between each syllable and an indication that the passage is to be read by the actress: “ON NA NO SHI RO I NI KU TA I NO NA KA NI YA SE TA U MI GA MI E RU” (IN SIDE THE WHITE FLESH OF A WO MAN A THIN O CEAN COMES IN TO VIEW). Why is it written this way instead of using a Japanese syllabary like the rest of the poem? What makes this line different?

The answer lies in the instructions in the row above: “read each character backwards, one by one, and then reverse it” (*ichiji ichiji gyaku-yomi shite, gyaku kaiten ni suru*). In faint pencil on the bottom row, we see a pronunciation guide in the katakana syllabary to achieve this: the end of the underlined phrase above, “*yaseta umi ga mieru*,” becomes the beginning of this katakana section below with the syllables reversed: “*ūru ē imu āgu imu ū ātu ēsu āi*.” It seems the actress was to read this backward pronunciation gloss aloud, and then the tape was reversed, creating a distorted, uncanny version of forward speech, linking her voice to the nonlinear temporalities allowed for by the capacities of magnetic tape—a vivid example of what Friedrich Kittler, writing about the phonograph, calls “Time Axis Manipulation as poetry—but poetry that transgresses its customary boundaries.”³⁵

So far we have only seen examples of monophony within this poem, but frequently two or more voices were layered on top of one another, with text in both the upper and lower main rows. In one example near the very end of the poem, on the upper main row—likely the one to be read aloud by the female actor—we see a single line of text stretched out in a horizontal line across the page instead of written in the usual columns: “*omae wa ittai doko e itta*” (Where on earth did you go?!). This choice of formatting seems to be tied to tempo and temporality, indicating that this line is to be read very slowly and heard at great volume (a penciled-in note above says “*ōkiku dasu koto*,” to play loudly). On the lower row—likely meant for the male actor—there is a condensed grid of five columns of characters that aligns with five of the syllables near the end of the horizontal line of text above. Each column of ten characters—like the first, “*kaze to kaze to kaze to kaze to kaze to*” (wind and wind and wind and wind and wind and)—is thus seemingly meant to be read in the time it takes for the other voice to read one syllable.

wind and wind and wind and wind and
wind and wind and stone and stone and
wind and stone and wind and wind and
stone and wind and stone and stone and
stone and stone and stone and stone do
not hear her voice

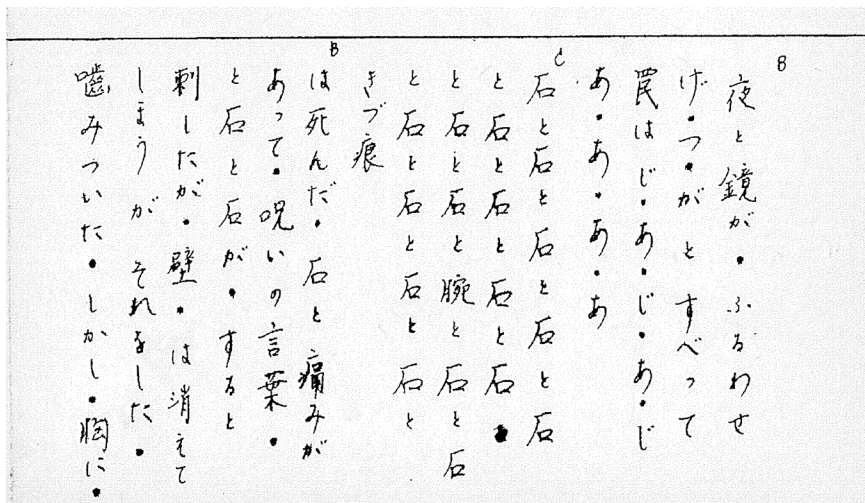


FIGURE 4. “Fugue-like” section from Akiyama Kuniharu’s 1953 script for “Poem for Tape Recorder: Composition B—Imprisoned Woman.” Private collection.

A penciled-in note next to this grid of characters provides another clue: “Increase more—speed up the turning” (*motto fuyashite kaiten hayameru*). This likely means that the recording of this passage is not meant to be played at the same speed at which it was spoken but is to be sped up (either live or in advance during editing) by turning one of the dials in the front of the G-Type tape recorder, quickening the progress of the magnetic tape reel around the spindles and through the machine. The abundance of passages in the poem like this one, where words are repeated almost to tedium—indeed, this is one of the shorter examples—in combination with this penciled instruction thus further indicates the tight imbrication of text and sonic manipulation.

Right before this section of the poem, and providing something of a climax, polyphony is reintroduced in a more elaborate form. Another penciled instruction, right before one voice (on the lower main row) takes over from the other (on the upper): “layered like a fugue (at a slow tempo).” A fugue is a term Akiyama took from classical music, referring to a form in which two or more melody lines or “voices” are played simultaneously in counterpoint—at times harmonizing, at times in dissonance with one another. The next page, section 29, begins the poetic “fugue” proper, in different voices marked “B” and “C” (figure 4):

B

the moon and the mirror • shook

lu • nar • gliding

a trap is ji • a • ji • a • ji

a • a • a • a

C

stone and stone and stone and stone and stone
 and stone and stone and stone and stone
 and stone and stone and arm and stone and stone
 and stone and stone and stone and stone and
 scars

B

all dead • there is stone and
 hurt • words of cursing •
 and stones and stone are • when
 stabbed but • walls • have
 disappeared • but did it •
 bit it • however • in the chest •

While the “C” voice consists of repeated words connected by “and,” a new element is introduced in the “B” voice passages: black dots interrupt the text after every few characters, fragmenting words and phrases and reducing comprehensibility. These may be meant for the narrator—indications to speaking haltingly, pausing at each dot—or for Akiyama himself, as reminders to chop up the syllables while editing the tape. The by-now familiar images of stones, mirrors, arms, walls, and so on return, but language seems to struggle to express anything. Two voices are joined in a “fugue-like” counterpoint, but unlike instrumental sounds, which can easily be layered on top of each other, overlapping voices speaking different words render each less comprehensible.

To give one last example of the use of classical music notation combined with poetic text, we find a long diminuendo marking penciled in above one of the final passages—that is, an instruction to gradually decrease volume (figure 5). Again, this may be meant for the narrators of the piece to indicate that they should speaking increasingly softly, but it is more likely a note for Akiyama himself—either for the tape mixing or the live performance—as a reminder to slowly turn down the volume in this portion. Whatever the case, the hybridity of the form Akiyama has created allows for amplitude to become an integral and specified aspect of the poem.

Once again, we have evidence of the capacities of the tape recorder both as it was used to manipulate poetic text, and also as an influence on how that text was composed. The “B” voice’s endless repetitions and the “C” voice’s fragmentation both serve to diminish the importance of intelligible speech and the referential meaning of the words involved in favor of making them into sonic materials of composition; a detailed understanding of what the poetic text is “saying” is not the focus of the piece, as would be the case in a conventional poetry reading or recording. Instead, flashes of intermittent comprehensibility serve to contribute to

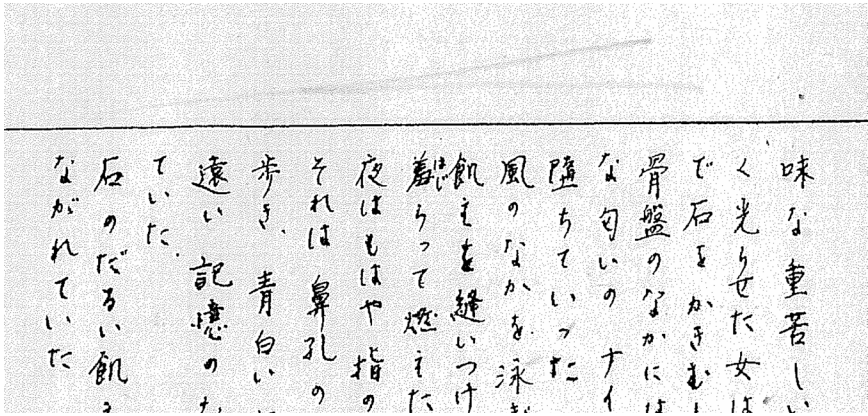


FIGURE 5. Diminuendo marking above text from Akiyama Kuniharu's 1953 script for "Poem for Tape Recorder: Composition B—Imprisoned Woman." Private collection.

an overall emotional effect. As written in the 5th Exhibition's program, instead of the "printed poetry" of the day, what we have here are new kinds of "tools of poetic expression within the sonic properties of language, in an attempt to consider these new mechanisms as processes of *poésie*."³⁶

RECOMPOSING THE POSTWAR VOICE

The links between poetry, sound, live performance, and recording in postwar Japan were fraught, to say the least. During the war itself, the opportunities for poetry readings—both at state-sponsored reading events and on radio broadcasts—increased massively. This, Tsuboi Hideto argues, "changed the consciousness of poetry production" in Japan: poetry became something that was written with the expectation that it not be read by the eye but read aloud, whether live and in person or transmitted via radio.³⁷ Another effect of this, however, is that poetry performance had become inextricably linked to propaganda, to support for the Japanese empire and the military. Postwar poetry in the anglophone world took a firm turn toward the "voice," that is, away from a text-only focus and toward live poetry readings and increased sonic expressivity, something that Michael Davidson credits to the spread of the tape recorder in the 1950s and the emergence of what he calls a "tapevoice" in poetry.³⁸ In Japan, however, there was a distinct turning *away* from live poetry events and broadcasts for several years after the end of the war. Like poetry readings, the burgeoning technology of the recorded and/or loudspeaker-amplified voice was also still deeply entwined in the popular imaginary with authoritarianism and war—with mechanically amplified voices at rallies, General Tōjō Hideki's frequent broadcasts, Hitler's

Magnetophone-recorded speeches, the “singing trees” of propaganda-blaring speakers installed by Japan in Southeast Asia, and, of course, the “Jewel Voice Broadcast” of Emperor Hirohito’s surrender, to name just a few examples. The tape recorder was also linked to surveillance, with constant depictions in both mass media and popular culture, for example, of rooms being bugged by secret police with hidden recording devices.³⁹

As seen in the prior section, “Poem for Tape Recorder: Composition B—Imprisoned Woman” is a long and complicated work, with thirty-six distinct sections, multiple instructions for both performance and playback manipulation, and at least two distinct voices that often overlap, fugue-like. While difficult to sum up, it is, in a word, harrowing, filled with nightmarish imagery and a deeply unsettling atmosphere; the tape manipulations of the voices involved must have been at least as disturbing as they were impressive. In other words, it was intentionally as divergent as possible from the wartime poetry readings and broadcasts of the preceding decade—or the loudspeaker-amplified instructions of the just-departed Allied occupation—in its deliberately confusing use of language, its use of an empty stage with prerecorded voices in lieu of live presences, and in its active reshaping and distortion of the voice through mechanical means. Although undoubtedly an experiment in the expansion of the possibilities of writing and the human voice using novel media technology, it is hard to pin down as liberatory, critical, or even oblivious in its aims. The bulk of the poetic text itself is undoubtedly grim: the titular “imprisoned woman,” the sole human figure, seems to be mostly powerless within an uncaring dreamscape, and her voice is combined with a machine that renders human speech into just another sound, often distorted beyond recognition or understanding. Is the potential of a human voice to be freed from the strictures of the flesh—able to wildly transform and even be combined with other voices—enough to become a way out of her psychic incarceration, or is this just a nightmarish sonic phantasmagoria that revels in a woman’s torment?

The text itself answers these questions differently, even from moment to moment. The first several sections set up the titular prison through poetic imagery of enclosure: the first voice, likely that of the female actor, constantly repeats phrases like “walls of night,” “walls holding in the screams of night,” and “walls of night and gates of night.” The other voice, likely that of the male actor, speaks a constant mantra of “black hair in the sand of night” (*yoru no naka no kuroi ke*), initially repeated fifteen times, with “black hair” eventually becoming a recurrent motif throughout the poem. The woman, however, is not simply a passive figure, bound and besieged throughout the length of the poem. Eventually, her hair becomes a recalcitrant sonic force in and of itself, an expansive mass of organic matter that at times overtakes the “walls,” “night,” and “stones” that fill the poem, and it becomes something that makes its own sound against the ceaseless wind, harnessing the “screaming night” itself: “the night entangled in the hair of the woman/is/making a sound/like stinging dead leaves/opening the overlapping

gates.” Near the end of the poem, as mentioned earlier, the second voice—likely in rapid fire, as indicated by the density of text on the page and the penciled-in instructions to “speed up the turning of the dials”—repeats the words “wind and wind and stone and stone” in varying permutations, fifty-eight times in total, at one point noting that “stone and stone and stone do not hear her voice” (*ishi to ishi to ishi to wa kanojo no koe o kikanai*), while the first voice, to be “played loudly” and drawn out at great length on the page, says, “Where on earth did you go?!” (*omae wa ittai doko e itta*). Sometimes the experience of the work evokes not just hearing but the *overhearing* characteristic of taped surveillance, even to the extent that it feels like we ourselves are the psychic wardens listening in to the woman’s thoughts in real time. Just as often, however, the poem—while not fully leaning into being straightforwardly “liberatory”—seems to center the woman as larger than her imprisonment, her body and consciousness overtaking the landscapes around her, her voice amplified and stretched out in a way that must have overtaken all other sounds in the piece, becoming a voice that no longer needs the audience of the wind and stones that “do not hear” her.

Akiyama’s intense thoughtfulness and self-reflexivity—both at the time of this work’s creation and throughout his long career as a music critic—lend themselves easily to understanding his use of sound media as a site of critique, not despite but because of their popular association with both wartime and occupation-era regimes of control. “Poem for Tape Recorder” aimed to force the audience to rethink the capabilities of language and the primacy of the human voice in a harrowing and unsettling way, in a performance literally within the headquarters of the just-departed occupation using a “Government-Type” tape recorder. Yet one could just as easily argue that this work’s radical potential was diminished from the beginning by its being first and foremost a tech demo, in which the massive corporation now known as Sony lent Jikken Kōbō—a group of young people with elite connections—some enormously expensive gadgets as a way to achieve some viral word of mouth about their products before their release on the consumer market. Of course avant-garde artistic practice has always had a fraught relationship to wider recognition and access to logistical and financial backing. Looking at the context of postwar Japan, Miryam Sas notes “the odd question of the acceptance of experimental work: in order to survive, it needs a certain degree of support and access; but at the moment of achieving that support, success, and (seeming) intelligibility there is a way in which it ceases to be ‘underground.’”⁴⁰ Far from being “underground,” many threads within experimental media in Japan, especially those works that made use of new media technologies, are strongly associated with the “postwar economic miracle,” a period of rapid growth beginning with occupation-era reconstruction at the end of the 1940s and peaking (in the popular imaginary, at least) in the 1960s. There was certainly a widespread optimism about the possibility of a peaceful future and a utopian attitude toward new consumer tech, culminating in the outrageous innovations of the 1970 Osaka

Expo (in which Akiyama was also deeply involved).⁴¹ It would be straightforward to argue that this poem was a direct predecessor to these “utopic” media experiments, an alliance between the corporate and the avant-garde that, intentionally or not, made cutting-edge technologies with even the most alarming potential implications palatable and normal. Yet this “Poem for Tape Recorder”—with its core of horror and despair, dissonances between its content and form, and healthy doses of skepticism at the changing relationship between technology and the human—is difficult to sum up in this way.

While many of the works in this volume are explicitly political in their subject matter—seemingly far more so than the rather abstract “Poem for Tape Recorder”—it would be a mistake to treat Akiyama’s piece as apolitical. As discussed in the introduction, Jacques Rancière argues that artistic practices are inherently political in that they are interventions in the “distribution of the sensible” shared by both politics and aesthetics, reconfiguring what is visible and invisible, who is able to speak, and to what we are able to listen.⁴² This is a useful way in to thinking about this and other experimental poetic works in postwar Japan, particularly in their manipulations of the sensorium through mediated vision, listening, and speaking. Akiyama’s “Poem for Tape Recorder” especially resonates with Rancière’s formulation of “politics as a form of experience,” one of the important delimitations of which is the boundary between “speech and noise.”⁴³ By using speech—in the form of a spoken poetic text—as raw material for sonic manipulation, Akiyama engaged directly with this division in the postwar “distribution of the sensible.” If speech is ostensibly meant to be first and foremost for the purposes of human communication, what happens if voices are distorted, reversed, fragmented, and layered in ways that make them partially or completely incomprehensible? Akiyama, working in a deliberately obscure neo-Surrealist mode of evoking dreamlike landscapes, does not offer us clear answers but seems to aim above all to transgress any distinctions between speech, music, and noise, refusing to prioritize one mode of sonic meaning making over the others.

The other distinction that is being transgressed here—in a way that prefigures the “intermedia” of the 1960s—is between types of practice. The complexity of an experimental work like this one resists a formulation in which “literary practices” were one thing, “sonic practices” were another, and works like Akiyama’s merely “combined” the two. Isabelle Stengers encourages us to think through an “ecology of practices” in which seemingly disparate acts are fundamentally intertwined. Within this ecology, poetic and sonic practices were deeply interlinked, both with each other—within the context of the postwar avant-garde in Japan as well as globally—and with the political, technological, and media environments of the time. “Poem for Tape Recorder” reminds us that poetry was not simply a “form of literature,” and it did not “evolve” in response to postwar political activism or new media technologies like the tape recorder. Rather, poetry emerged within a

dense and co-constitutive ecology of literary, sonic, technological, and political practices, constantly in flux and difficult to reduce to models of influence, linear development, or through the conventional framing of an artistic work and its “context.” Akiyama and Jikken Kōbō did not use poetry to “comment” on the postwar political, social, and technological environment as if they were outside it, but they actively attempted to shape it from within.

RECOMPOSING “SOUND”

The question of “sound” and its role in this piece is also an uneasy one. If the recording of “Poem for Tape Recorder” still existed, it would be impossible to deny it as a pioneering work of “sound art” or “sound poetry,” but all that remains of it are two nearly identical handwritten scores and a handful of accounts that were explored at the beginning of this chapter. “Sound” and “the sonic,” however, cannot be reduced to “things one hears” in the same way that the “cinematic” constitutes much more than “what you see on screen.” “Poem for Tape Recorder”—not only as a poetic experiment but also precisely in its current existence as a work that only exists on the page—is a way into thinking about “sound,” “sonic media,” and “composition” in a more expansive sense.

Seth Kim-Cohen advocates for thinking about “non-cochlear sound art,” echoing Marcel Duchamp’s advocacy of a “‘non-retinal’ visual art” that resisted a conflation of artistic practice with concerns of taste and beauty.⁴⁴ Kim-Cohen’s move toward “non-cochlear sound art” is a move toward a “conceptual turn” within sound studies aiming at a “nonessentialist perspective” about what sound and sonic arts are or could be.⁴⁵ This is not a rejection, he stresses, of the “eye and the ear” but “necessarily engage[s] both the non-cochlear and the cochlear” in a way that remains “skeptical” toward the notion of *sound-in-itself* and “not restricted to the realm of the sonic.”⁴⁶ Kakinuma Toshie argues that this kind of “non-cochlear art” was key to postwar experimental practice in Japan and abroad, particularly the works of Shiomi Mieko, Yoko Ono, and Takehisa Kosugi as part of the Fluxus collective. She points to John Cage’s visit to Japan in 1962 as a catalyst for artistic approaches that engaged with sound obliquely or by other means: they “took sound as their starting point and circumvented it to move toward ‘hearing,’ and then shifted their focus to types of sensation that differed from that of the everyday.”⁴⁷ Originating almost a decade before this, Akiyama’s “Poem for Tape Recorder” has become an example of “non-cochlear sound art” after the fact in its current “silent” state as poetic text/script/score and as lost recording, still completely shaped even in written form by sonic practices and modes of meaning making.

There is also a strong resonance between Akiyama’s work and the works of the contemporary Deaf sound artist Christine Sun Kim. Kim reimagines the borders of both sound and sound art through a culturally Deaf perspective, foregrounding

how sound can act as an equivalent to “money, power, [and] control,” though it is rarely recognized as such in hearing-dominant culture.⁴⁸ In her work, she too asks us to reimagine sound outside the cochlear and takes a playful yet fiercely critical stance toward its rigid conventions of signification—particularly in terms of who they exclude—with the goal of creating her “own information system and new theories of what sound should or could be, using new forms.”⁴⁹ She reframes sign language visibility as aurality, for example, and manipulates the elements of musical notation (scores, notes, rests, staves, clefs, and so on) in unexpected and jarring ways. While Deaf poetics will be a major focus of chapter 5 of this book, there is much in common between Deaf poetry and art and Akiyama’s refusal to take the sound or voice as a “given.” The “voice” becomes something that unfurls across the world of “Poem for Tape Recorder” in ways that echo Davidson’s description of the voice in Kim’s work as “neither inside nor outside but in a state of continual reinvention and re-direction, complicating boundaries between sound and silence, deaf and hearing, language, and space.”⁵⁰

Finally, when it comes to sound and music, “composition” is usually a term that brings to mind a composer who creates a score by writing musical notes on a staff, which is then performed by musicians and singers. As discussed before, Akiyama was known as a poet and a composer despite never publishing a poem and never composing a piece using formal musical notation, at least at this point. Luc Döbereiner foregrounds an expanded approach to composition, one that is especially useful when considering postwar Japanese intermedia works like Akiyama’s.⁵¹ This is not composition as an abstracted practice, reducing inherently nonrepresentational sound into a written symbolic system like musical notes. Rather, he describes a kind of formalism that is also nonrepresentational, “constituted by drawing a border in compositional practice.”⁵² What is stressed here is not the role of a human composer in arranging “sound in itself,” but rather, drawing on the work of Karen Barad, the mutual constitution and active reconfiguration of “subject” and “object”—in this case, composers and sonic materials, through the conceptual and material apparatus of composition.⁵³ Though it might be the case that sound is something that exists outside symbolic systems of representation, both sound and composer *are constituted by the act of composition itself*. In this view, Akiyama is firmly a composer, as his contemporaries asserted, despite his not writing music on a five-line staff. Indeed, his “Composition B” spectacularizes Döbereiner’s conception of composition as a far broader process in which “composer” and “composed” are entangled, whether through the scripts handwritten in ink and pencil, the physically manipulated magnetite paper tape, or the empty stage where neither composer nor performer is present. Poetry writing is transmuted into composition, where what is “composed” is not just a “work” but several intertwined bodies, materials, and experiences. Akiyama’s “Composition B” is not a single distinct object but a cluster of texts, voices and other sonic materials, tape reels, performers, audience members, machines, and memories,

and which ones of these are and are not extant at any given moment cannot but change through time.

The manuscripts for “Poem for Tape Recorder” reflect their complex status as “compositions,” sometimes quite literally. They use some symbols commonly associated with sheet music, as discussed earlier—markings to indicate rhythm, diminuendo, and so on—highlighting a renewed focus on a conception of *poem as score*. This has been a characteristic of poetry as long as it has taken written form: “poems” from around the premodern world in particular were certainly written first and foremost for the purpose of reading or singing aloud, with various kinds of annotation used to aid in proper rhythmic, tonal, and dynamic interpretation. Modern poetry at first moved away from this—away from musicality and orality as central to the experience of a poem and toward a private, silent communion of a solitary reader with a printed text. Yet in works like Akiyama’s in postwar Japan and in the broader global postwar avant-garde, this aspect of poetry reemerged with force, albeit in ways that deliberately differentiated themselves from the association between poetry performance and war. The poem—having long existed at the intersection of text, visuality, and sound—became central as a tool in intermedia through which not only could sound be composed, but experiences, sensations, and affects of all kinds could be “scored.” The “poetic” became a way to refer to an expanded conception of writing across media—in this case, writing through voices, pens, pencils, and magnetic tape—in the form of language-centric composition, using sonic practices associated with sound recording and music to create scores both for performance and for the imagination.

RECREATING “IMPRISONED WOMAN” AFTER SIXTY YEARS

At a 2016 recital held in Tokyo by Aki Takahashi—the renowned avant-garde pianist and widow of Akiyama Kuniharu—in the large concert hall of Tokyo Opera City, I sat, by coincidence, next to a pianist and composer named Kawai Takuji. Takahashi introduced the two of us, noting that Kawai might have already been familiar to me for one very specific reason: he played the role of the male narrator in a 2013 version of Akiyama’s poem for tape recorder, “Imprisoned Woman.”

The full title of this recreation of Akiyama’s “lost” work is “Imprisoned Woman ~ Based on Akiyama Kuniharu’s Poem for Tape Recorder” (“Torawareta onna ~ Akiyama Kuniharu no tēpu rekōda no tame no shi ni yoru”). It was composed by the Nara-based electroacoustic composer Higaki Tomonari based on Akiyama’s original scripts/scores. With vocal performances by Kawai and Ōta Maki, it premiered in November 2014 at a concert held in honor of a major exhibition of Jikken Kōbō’s works in Fukuoka, just over six decades after the premiere of Akiyama’s work in 1953. It later became the titular and opening track on Higaki’s 2015 CD *Torawareta Onna (Imprisoned Woman)*, with a length of 16 minutes and 9 seconds.⁵⁴

The “based on” in its title is significant; this recording was not a relatively straightforward matter of performing a preexisting work, like a pianist playing from sheet music. Higaki, engaging with the extant sparse script/score—and the vague and often baffling penciled-in directions discussed earlier—necessarily created a composition that is both Akiyama’s and his own, at once harrowing and beautiful, mercurially shifting mood and timbre from section to section. All of the words in Akiyama’s poem are present, performed in the same order, largely by Kawai. But long after the days of the monaural G-Type tape recorder, Higaki takes full advantage of the stereo capabilities of contemporary recording technologies, creating a vast aural space that seemingly comes from all directions. Voices are echoed, slowed down, distorted, echoed, layered, looped, and fragmented. Ōta, playing the role of the “woman,” appears only rarely but strikingly, her voice manipulated and drawn out into a spectral drone or cutting in with operatic wails. At one point, where dialogue lines are set off by quotation marks in Akiyama’s script, Kawai is clearly outside, with what sounds like a pedestrian crossing signal beeping in the background. At other points Kawai multiplies, some of his voices sounding as if they are right next to the listener’s left ear, others to the right, and still others barely audible from a distant imagined horizon. With very few indications of what the original soundscape was like, Higaki had full freedom to create an original sonic background, with rumbles, chimes, and other metallic sounds appearing at spare but dramatic moments.

Taken altogether, Higaki’s 2013 reimagination of Akiyama’s work still sounds novel—quite unlike any poetry, music, or sound art from the last several decades. It is innovative, challenging, and a powerfully literary work while still remaining difficult to effectively describe or interpret using existing techniques of literary analysis. More than anything, however, it reemphasizes that in 1953—well before the vast majority of well-known experimental poetic, artistic, and musical creations from the postwar era—Akiyama Kuniharu’s original “Poem for Tape Recorder—Composition B: Imprisoned Woman” was a new kind of poem. Strikingly and deliberately distant from the “printed poetry” that the 5th Exhibition’s program asserted was the only other poetry extant at that point, “Imprisoned Woman” was a poem that existed as manipulated sound, as magnetic tape, as plural voices, as tech demo, as script, as score, as empty stage—and now, as lost media. Sound recording made it possible to decouple the voice not just from the presence of the person speaking—something also key to telephony and radio broadcasting—but from the event of its production, allowing it to be heard and reheard on later occasions. With the development and spread of the consumer magnetic tape recorder in the postwar era, not only did this capacity become available to a much broader audience, many of whom could now listen to their own voice for the first time, but it made all recorded sounds into elements that could be arranged and rearranged into different configurations. Voices, instruments, sound effects, and electronically generated tones, once inscribed on magnetic

tape, could all be spliced, layered, reversed, amplified, fragmented, and otherwise manipulated in an expanded form of writing. A “poem” became a mode of composition across media in which language played a central role. In the case of Akiyama’s “Poem for Tape Recorder,” language was made first and foremost into sonic material, redefining the borders of poetic practice and recomposing the poetic voice in ways that continue to echo today.