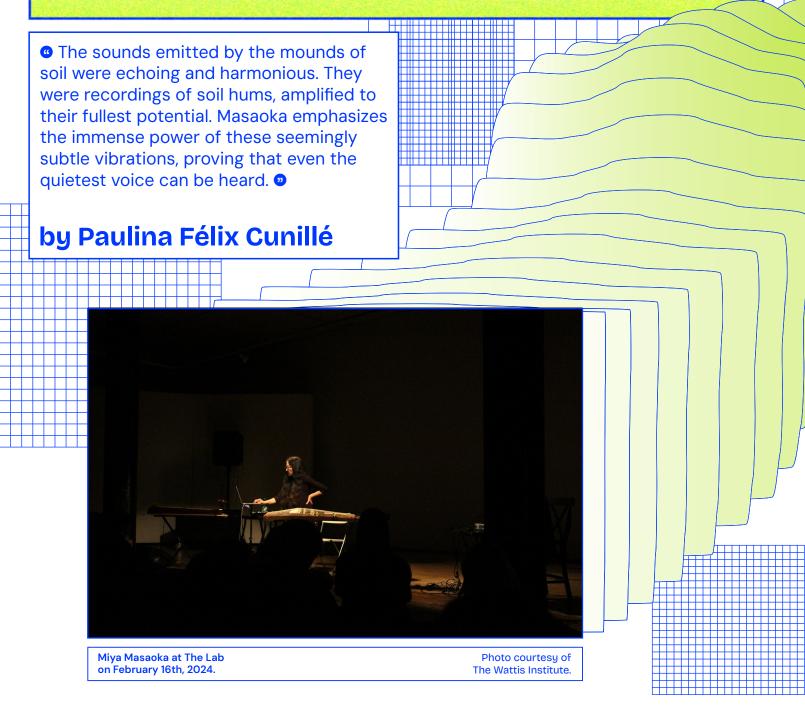
What If I Heard the Tremble?: Miya Masaoka at The Lab and the Wattis Institute





Miya Masaoka reminds us that the Earth trembles and speaks, asserting that we are not alone. Soil has a name for its sound: a hum, which is mostly inaudible to human ears due to its low frequency. But through this hum, Masaoka conveys the presence of soil and plant life. After 30 years of practice, the artist continues to explore the impact of climate change and the flow of plants in nature through aural and earthy installations and performances at The Lab SF and the Wattis Institute, respectively.

The instrumental performance at The Lab took place on February 16, 2024. Composed of three instruments, along with Tammen's synthesizer, Masaoka presented her explorations of sound. To the left of the scene was Masaoka with her contemporary version of Japan's national instrument, the koto with 17 strings. Next to it was its one-string version, the *ichigenkin*, and in between them was her laptop, with which she accompanied the instruments through pre-recorded tracks.

Masaoka and Tammen transported the hundreds of audience members to an otherworldly atmosphere within the dimly lit room of The Lab. A screech – coming from Tammen's synthesizer – broke the silence. Masaoka followed by stroking her koto gently and decisively. This instrument mostly creates delicate sounds, which Masaoka manipulated further in her experiments on gagaku music. At some point, she used a cello/violin bow on the koto, reaching a sonic similarity to those instruments while she held the other end of the strings. But screeching would again repeat itself through the clash of the strings and bow. Almost as if the instrument was lamenting. Unlike the koto, the *ichigenkin* was more haunting. As if a rock concert was being held after the angelic performance. During the final moments of the performance, Tammen's synthesizer emitted a buzzing sound similar to the static noise produced by analog televisions. The vibrations caused by this sound could be felt through the walls and continued to resonate at varying intensities for several minutes, ultimately signaling the end of the performance.

Immersed in this buzzing, I thought of the humming occurring at the Wattis, where Masaoka's plant installation had opened for one week at their research space on the same day of her performance. Thinking of these works as connected, I see Masaoka's performance as a continuation of her mystical translation of plants' dialogue, showcasing the possibilities of "silent" sound. I think of both the plant installation and the performance as demonstrating two different versions of non-human life. One aural, the other organic.

In conversation with the Wattis Institute's Research Season on the artist Anicka Yi, Masaoka's plant installation at the Wattis Bar evokes a human understanding of what it might feel like to be a plant, aligning with Yi's own focus on embodying microorganisms through the human senses. Three mounds of soil were positioned in front of the wall displaying Yi's bacteria stickers titled *Orbis Mundi Is Yours to Take in Hand* (2015). Masaoka's soil mounds, titled *Dirty Sounds/Sounds Dirty*, emitted a slight hum and vibration. Nevertheless, they did not speak; as Masaoka explained, they communicated through mud codes, reflected in their triangle and rectangle shapes.



Miya Masaoka, *Dirty Sounds/Sounds Dirty* (left) and *The Masses* (center), 2024. Photo by Paulina Félix Cunillé

The sounds emitted by the mounds of soil were echoing and harmonious. They were recordings of soil hums, amplified to their fullest potential. Masaoka's work emphasizes the immense power of these seemingly subtle vibrations, proving that even the quiet-

est voice can be heard. Unfortunately, seeing that such a delicate presence can still be met with hostility is disheartening. During the installation's first day, someone intentionally stomped through the soil blocks, requiring them to be remade. This incident serves as a reminder that Masaoka's examination of the perils of climate change and appreciation for non-human life is crucial, much like Yi's musings on the potential of coexisting with other organisms. Despite our insensitivity, nature will always endure or re-adapt, with or without us.

The plants in Masaoka's installation, titled *The Masses*, got louder to the touch. They spoke. They complained. While attached to sensors, they retold data of extreme weather reports from the wind speed in Russian, German, Spanish, and Japanese, and could not remain silent. Although new for some of the people in the audience, Masaoka has explored the "voices" of the natural world before. She recalls one of her first pieces that inspired her to explore plant sounds: a series of recordings from the human body. As a result of analyzing the sounds of the brain and heart, she created a symphony of the body. Turning our vital functions into a musical composition, Masaoka points toward the harmony of interdependence within the world.



Miya Masaoka, *The Masses*, 2024. Portraits by Paulina Félix Cunillé

With this in mind, I can discern her understanding of the ecosystem from her performance. Masaoka considers both events, performance and installation, as an anthology of her work and sees them as more integrated than when she first began her practice. For her, music is part of the natural world as her string instruments follow the basic laws of science and physics; changing the position and pressure of your finger causes an alteration.

As I examined the blocks before me, I thought of Yi's cosmology glossary term, terroir. Drawn from authors German Meulemans, Jeff VanderMeer, and Ian Tattersall & Rob Desalle, I am most interested in the definition provided by Tattersall and Desalle, as they explain it as a set of qualities important for growing grapes within enology. Yet, terroir extends beyond soil, encompassing all the elements of the ecosystem, their biological interactions and their effects. This reminded me of Masaoka's observation that potted plants inevitably seek to return to their natural habitat, the soil. She also mentioned certain plants have a quicker response rate than others and a symbiotic relationship with insects. Hence, at the Wattis, Masaoka created a terroir, in which the plants spoke for themselves and the soil, while the soil vibrated discreetly regardless. If everyone heard the tremble of plants and soil as we did with Masaoka's installation, would we care for plants more than we do now?

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