

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

“ The sounds emitted by the mounds of soil were echoing and harmonious. They were recordings of soil hums, amplified to their fullest potential. Masaoka emphasizes the immense power of these seemingly subtle vibrations, proving that even the quietest voice can be heard. ”

by **Paulina Félix Cunillé**

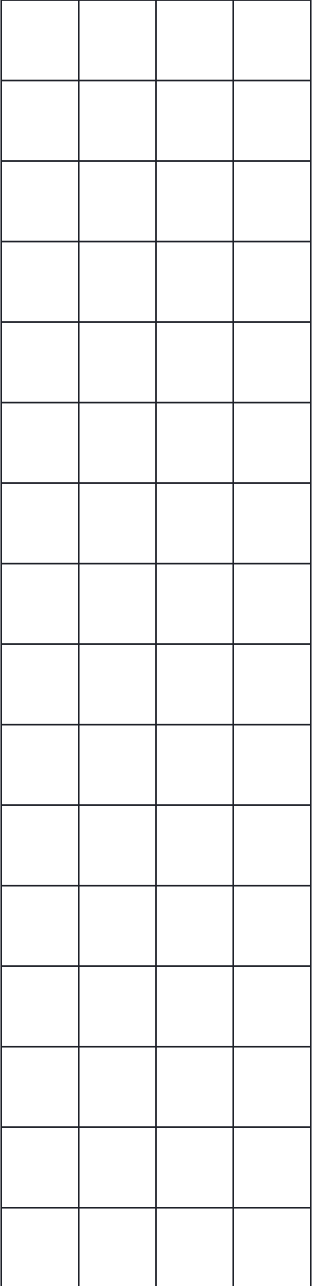


Miya Masaoka at The Lab  
on February 16th, 2024.

Photo courtesy of  
The Wattis Institute.

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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







