Techno as Rock's Anti-Gravity

Ken ISHII and TAKEMURA Mitsuhiro

Feature

The Transformation of Music Effected by the Computer

TAKEMURA: Anti-gravity" as a concept is itself fairly old.   In the seventies, it was an anti-establishment concept, which in keeping with the times questioned how to transcend the existing system.   However, in the eighties, with the rise of computer technology, new cultures and a world perspective produced by the inertia laws of physical matter began to permeate the daily landscape. Merchandise consumed by the public ranging from products unique to Japan such as Tamagotchi, loose socks,[1]   and purikura (print club)[2]   to global products such as Swatch and Air Max, are an example.   If one examines consumer trends by looking at these "things" as media, one could say that in the case of Japan, affective attributes, which perhaps cannot be understood according to former values affixed to "things," enter more heavily into the current phenomenon.

Today, when thinking about the issue of cyberspace, how to form a correspondence between the virtual world and actual worlds emerges as a consideration. However, virtuality exists to a much greater degree in the actual world itself, and I think that the consumer items which are inundating the public can be seen as embodying an "anti-gravitational" influence. During the eighties we witnessed the rise of club culture.   The techno and electronic music of that time was several years ahead of image-based and electronic media. I have the feeling that now, in the latter half of the nineties, the world of sound is changing the former sense of values attached to physical things and the structure of consumption. Within that process, ISHII-san, as someone who is active in a global space, how would you describe the context within which you are received? Also, I would like to know how you yourself conceive of the word "anti-gravity."

ISHII: To begin with, I think it has to do with the growing familiarity with computers. The computer has ceased to be a privileged object and now anyone can access machines that no one could even touch ten

years ago. Because, of course, these people are not chosen, so to speak, their activities exceed that of the specialist and they are doing all kinds of wild things. I myself fall into this category. I, someone who was not born to be a musician, yet am doing music (laugh). I think one can say the same thing about the design and gaming fields. After all, compared to ten years ago, great changes have occurred. One could call this area "anti-gravity."

TAKEMURA: Is this an effect of the transformation of systems?

ISHII: Yes.

In the history of music, for example, there is an order to the kind of music that becomes popular. In the twentieth century, first jazz rose from the underground and became popular and then rock became big. When thought about in this way, I believe that techno and DJ culture today are the anti-gravity of rock. Even now in Europe, America, and Japan there is opposition to us from the rock business, and it is difficult to break into the market. In that regard, I am conscious of the fact that we belong to this arena which is resisted.

TAKEMURA: Then, would you say that a counter-cultural sensibility like that of the seventies still exists today?

ISHII: Well, I was a child during the seventies, and in a certain sense it may be that the current sensibility differs from the one back then. Moreover, I have the feeling that it is somehow different than that of the eighties as well. Also, on the one hand, you have things such as trance and Goa today,[3] which I think are drawing once again from the seventies. But, I have the impression that there is always something about each era which makes it unique

TAKEMURA: The globalization of media continues to develop given the expansion of seamless space and the condensation of time. As a result, the transmission of information has become increasingly rapid. For instance, the rate with which the images in <<EXTRA>> are transmitted in your collaborative work with MORIMOTO Koji,[4] <<JELLY TONES>>,[5] is extremely fast. Do you experience the effects of globalization in your work?

ISHII: For my generation, even something like the Net comes naturally to us. The sense that one can do this and can also do that is different from the generation before us. Techno and DJ culture share the feature of being among the last strongholds of analog culture, but if you actually use the Net the communication it facilitates immediately becomes up-to-date. From mail to telephone to fax and then email appears to be a natural progression, and via this new form of communication, which emerged naturally over time, you can get information about Japan in Europe and information about Europe in Japan. For instance, the situation is such that if you are in Europe and you think that a Japanese animation is about to become popular, and you ask around, you will eventually meet someone who has the information you want. This is the same situation as on the Net. For me, the fact that you can engage in cultural discussions on the same level wherever you are is part of the natural flow of things.

TAKEMURA: In music, digitization came about first. And now people no longer need a large studio space or enormous facilities. Rather, with products such

as personalized order-made systems, not to mention new forms of distribution, great changes have taken place. Of course, there was already a commercialized global market in place, but it has expanded so that now an individual can take segments of very diverse sounds and customize them.

Moving between the Virtual and the Real

TAKEMURA: Well, looked at worldwide, Japanimation, Manga, comics, and games are becoming increasingly popular. Have you been conscious of Japanese culture when working in the European context?

ISHII: Given that I entered the field of music, I have tried only to be original, rather than question whether or not my work is Japanese. When my album was first released and I dealt with the foreign press, I was an object of interest simply for the fact that I was Japanese. Most people grow up without being conscious of their so-called Japanese roots--It was in doing business that I was made aware of mine. But again, it is originality that is important to me. As is the case with techno and rock, what good is it to be the most popular, active, cool band in Japan if you are merely imitating what is happening abroad? If you go to New York, there will be tens and thousands of bands just like you that have been around for five years. You can try to imitate them but you'll be no match. Looked at from this perspective, instrument technology becomes a key point. For instance, take the instruments used in techno, they are sold first in Japan. Instruments made in Japan are used the most among musicians. If there is a half-year to a year lag in availability elsewhere, then there is greater possibility of creating an original sound in Japan. I am taking advantage of these types of opportunities.

TAKEMURA: I listen to your music a lot and it is always something new. DJs in Holland, for instance, say that your sound is something they have never heard before. Especially in the case of techno and electronic music, are you very conscious of how

you integrate your perceptions of analog and other types of information?

ISHII: First of all, at the time this music was being created there was really no information available. For example, there was absolutely no information regarding the music put out in New York or Germany under independent labels--you would just listen to whatever happened to come into the record store. In such a situation, first of all, your music has to be appealing. You have no name or face. It's just your music that serves as a starting point. So, whether

you can get people from a completely different culture to listen to your music and have them think "this is good" becomes crucial.

TAKEMURA; That is an extremely important point. In thinking about the mutual influence of technology and culture, borders become an important issue. Formerly, when something was exported from Japan it was through Japonisme, or, for instance, something like Kabuki. What broke this trajectory and then reconstructed it, say in the seventies and eighties, is Butoh, which received a great deal of attention in Europe. In opposition to the very

refined sanctuary of Western dance, exemplified by toe shoes, Butoh stood for nativity, local custom, Jomon culture, and the primitive. This form of dance, in which the dancers twist their bodies and jump around, created a consciousness of gravity-- of what it heavy and what is light-- and the weight that counters what takes off. By no means can Japan compete with the

MORIMOTO Koji《Eikyu kazoku》 © BEYOND C

West in the same cultural context, and thus, in a certain sense, I think that the exchange between density and weightlessness has contributed to the creation of culture. Even in the current music scene you have ambient music, which departs from notions of gravity and is instead more sensual in conception. When you try to create a certain sense of time or space and must consider visuality as well, do you find that there is a difference between using effects in real space and creating music for a CD work?

ISHII: Yes, of course there is a difference. When you have people dancing in a closed-off space, you play with the equalizers. It's similar to the experience you have, for example, when fishing. In time, you develop a sense that tells you "there are fish hiding over there in those weeds." When I create music, I place emphasis on arrangement and composition. I think about what would feel good either when I am at home drinking with my friends, or when I have headphones on right before I fall asleep.

TAKEMURA: While CDs are seen as being no more than information, you have the argument that

live music is based on feeling. But in the real space of live music, digital bytes of information are also consumed by the auditory senses. That is to say, there is an exchange between information and the real space of live music. In many instances, musicians experience this process over a long period of time and soon lose their connection with the real space of live music; it might be that they will end up existing entirely in the virtual world. Given such a situation, how do you conceive of the act of live music?

ISHII: My generation may be the last or close to the last generation which believes in the analog component of human beings. The desire to see a person's face, of wanting to touch something still remains. If about ninety percent of music is so-called data and the remaining ten percent is something like faith, it is first of all that ten percent we want to convey. If at the end of a show when I turn toward the audience they respond enthusiastically just because I've raised my hands, it is really a moving experience. What is fun about live performance itself is that it involves something fundamentally human.

TAKEMURA: Suppose you take what could be called anti-gravity consumer goods and examine various items. You would, in fact, get a glimpse of how perceptions and sensations interact in the exchange between the virtual and real worlds. Do you think this interaction will be part of the young generation's experience?

ISHII: As long as the instinct to eat, sleep, and have sex still remains, I think it probably will. I would like to think that music must be tied into this somehow. Although this may just be wishful thinking on my part...

TAKEMURA: For example, children flocked to the department stores when Tamagotchi were first sold in Amsterdam. Parents had no understanding of what made the product so interesting, but children were attracted to it and it was a big hit. I have the feeling that "magma" produced in isolation from the rest of the world, refined and cultivated in Japan, is now being nurtured within the framework of industry and descending on global contemporary pop and youth culture.

ISHII: In speaking to people outside Japan, Kabuki, geisha, and Mt. Fuji no longer come up in conversation at all (laugh). Instead, the topics are games and animation. For the young generation in Europe and America, the primary association with Japan might be games. Also, there is still an extremely negative view of the way Japan does business. But once Japan's output has been evaluated, a growing number of people automatically understand the environment in which it was produced. To give an example, there is not much real work to be done abroad for Japanese record companies even if they have been successful in Japan. But there is now an understanding abroad that the Japanese can produce good work. Foreign companies are slowly coming to think of Japanese companies as business partners of which they can ask, for example, "Can you complete this work by tomorrow morning?"

The Anti-Gravity of the Multimedia Age

TAKEMURA: Activities that used to require facilities, staff, and huge systems can now be done easily on the Web. Digital images and 3D computer graphics are within reach. In this way, performance levels rise when high-end systems are gradually made available to individuals. However, the new model is inevitably labor intensive. You must manage your performance and schedule yourself, for you can no longer work within the time framework allotted by the system. Do you think that changes in the labor intensive environment of those working in multimedia are being thought about in conjunction with the structure of Japanese business?

ISHII: Yes, I think so. Everyone would like to think well of the place they are from. For instance, Londoners are extremely confident about their music, and New Yorkers think they are number one as far as art goes. And in Paris it's fashion. So it's about time and only natural that Tokyo asserts confidently "here's something we won't easily be beat at." Actually, Tokyo is regarded as one of the major techno cities worldwide, and it interacts quite naturally with other techno cities. I have the sense that this also relates to anti-gravity.

TAKEMURA: That's right. The only thing certain is that former structures of value and frameworks

MORIMOTO Koji 《EXTRA》　© R&S RECORDS／BEYOND C

have changed greatly. For instance, with music circulation, you now have digital bytes of information, so people consider distribution via the Web, which requires no packaging. It was said early on that if the content itself could be distributed immediately, then perhaps the framework of the music industry, which until now has revolved around the record company, could be changed. There are Web sites that have been around for a long time which function as hubs from which you can freely download and sample sound elements. What do you think of the anti-gravitational changes effected by such heavy circulation systems?

ISHII: If you look at the current situation, former methods of circulation are intact, which is evidence that everyone still has the impulse to consume *things*. But what has changed greatly with the Internet is that it has become very easy for people who were previously unable to present their work to do so. Until now you could not present your work to an unspecified segment of the general public unless you did something high-handed, like sing in the streets. This is a tremendous difference compared to fifteen years ago.

TAKEMURA: You could call this itself a revolutionary form of anti-gravity. But in the case of music, do you think a reality which one can actually grasp will remain?

ISHII: I don't have any friends who are in elementary school, but that's something I would like to ask kids that age. Right now there is a phenomenon called the "pocket monster,"[6] but that's not about collecting things. I'd like to ask them if they have a sense of collecting things like we had when we collected erasers. In music, if you look at the overall sales of the domestic record industry, they are basically on the rise. Taking this into consideration, I feel like it is still hard to read the future. But I can't help feel that somehow the desire to have *things* will inevitably remain.

TAKEMURA: We consume new perceptions and

sensations through *things*, and conversely these *things*, apparatuses for developing new perceptions and sensations, are continually undergoing transformation. Electric appliances, which made former means of livelihood and labor more functional and provided alternatives, gave way to TV and media apparatuses, forms of informational entertainment. Furthermore, the market today is inundated with consumer goods which appear to have reconstructed the very state of new perceptions and forms of communication. To give an example, "keitai" (cellular phone)--only used by businessman in the past--although originally written with Chinese characters, is now written in informal phonetic script. Skeleton models have appeared and all kinds of digital toys (mascots) are being attached to them-- a state unimaginable five years ago. This marked transformation within pop and youth culture of the value of media and *things* is precisely what can be termed "anti-gravity."

ISHII: Yes, that may be. The younger generation is naturally receptive to new technologies. This might also be an issue of national character as well.

TAKEMURA: The original meaning of animation is to infuse things with movement, with life or a kind of life force. Does the animation for <<Jelly Tones>>, the piece for which you and MORIMOTO received the European MTV award, incorporate this strategy?

ISHII: Of course. Until now, in European and American animation, the stories were geared toward children and the characters were meant to be cute-- they were simply for kids. From their point of view, Japanese animation, which has been made into films, has, to begin with, a story. And because there is a story, violence and sex are involved--they had not seen anything like this before. They were surprised first by this aspect and later by the intricacy of the art form, the workmanship. Japanese animation, which has a profound aspect to it, completely changed the consciousness of Europeans and Americans.
I would say of my music that I don't particularly

strive to produce something Japanese. As someone who makes Japan his base rather than living abroad, it would appear that I am regarded as a new type of artist--but my use of Japanese animation was actually coincidental. The spread of Japanese Manga and animation in Europe has been tremendous. A few years ago when I went to Paris for promotion, a Manga festival was being held. Commercial products were being sold, and not only were there many children in attendance, but there were adults too. The event was sponsored entirely by the Japanese embassy! I was invited there and interviewed.

TAKEMURA: That itself is a form of "anti-gravity" isn't it?

《JELLY TONES》
R&S RECORDS SRCS 7887

ISHII: Yeah, I was surprised. There were "cosu pure" (costume play, people who dress up as Manga characters) there -- I found the Japanese characters with Western faces to be somewhat incongruous (laugh). But this is something that would have been inconceivable in the past. Japanese Manga are being sold as is, in Japanese, and the French are flocking to buy them...

Subculture's Recovery of the High-End

Until recently the only computer known for its visual qualities was the Amiga. At present, however, tools that can create high-end 3D computer graphics on the PC are being sold at low prices. In order to simplify quality for broadcast, the subculture and underground created a type of Amiga culture; it is at this very moment that the history of recovering the high-end is being enacted. These are not terms instigated by the multimedia industry.

Rather, these representational tools were created by both pop and youth culture in their truest sense. Although, compared to music there may be about a ten-year lag. At the beginning of the eighties when MIDI was developed and sampling and remixes were popular, image-based media were still restricted within a system. Finally, in the latter part of the nineties--although there is about a ten-year differential-- I think that perhaps there will be a breakthrough.

ISHII: It's a great thing that these tools are becoming a larger part of our daily lives. Better, more extraordinary results are being produced by people without traditional music education. In the past, people could make a living just by having a synthesizer, but now their livelihood is in jeopardy. In music and film, something like a democratic revolution is truly underway. I wasn't able to play the guitar very well and gave up after awhile-- I couldn't have become a musician without the computer. I think there are many such people. When they entered this profession something new was born. Acid house is an example of the music of penniless DJs becoming popular worldwide. I think what has happened in the music world can happen with image-based media too. It is my hope that people with no special training will discover and appropriate the right software and create various new things.

TAKEMURA: Today, the PC functions as a personal studio and distribution is carried out over the Internet--one is impressed by these high-speed possibilities. I have an acquaintance who is a DJ in Amsterdam and lives in a three-story building. His studio,

which is on the first floor, is no bigger than three *tatami* mats. But he creates amazing sounds. Given this kind of situation, I have been aware for many years of the instantaneous influence of electronic media and modes of transmission--an effect far more powerful than any exerted by the mass media until now. In that sense, I have the feeling that the attributes of this new kind of consumerism can be seen, conversely, in the commercial products that are inundating the market.

ISHII: At the same time, I think music is changing for the better. While the presentational format has been simplified, the actual sites of music production and activities are returning to what they once were.

TAKEMURA: Like that of artisans?

ISHII: Originally, dance music was something local; you composed it with people in your circle and performed it with or for them. Music was something which could be done with just a few people. Then people who thought "this will make money" gathered and built companies. After all, it's only been several decades since major record companies were formed. Until then, all you needed was someone to make music and someone to listen. This relationship is slowly being recuperated.

TAKEMURA: Really, it is indeed a small community. It has scattered all over the world and created a network.

ISHII: You can create music with close friends and also play it for people you don't know. I feel there is once again a way to continue to make music a fun activity, and that is also a plus. In that sense, perhaps it is, in part, a return of sorts.

TAKEMURA: In a certain way, the relations have become simpler. "Scientific technology" sounds complicated, but when it's actually employed, what is interesting is that, in fact, it produces simple human relations.

ISHII: An increasing number of people simply decide "all right, this is cool, I'll buy it" and use technology indiscriminately, without thinking. This is particularly so in the music world. There are people who have absolutely no understanding of the computer. They just say, "I want to produce this kind of beat. I'll buy this one." The motives are becoming simpler, and in response the opportunities for new products are growing respectively.

TAKEMURA: Do you have a particular awareness about your work, which includes samplings from pre-existing works, in comparison to the act of creating something new?

ISHII: Now that my music career is somewhat established, I often have the desire to create something new. But when I step back and take a look around, I sense how vast the field of music is. If I think about creating something new, then my thoughts are no more than that of one individual. But if I take even a slight look, tens, hundreds of thousands of people are making music. Drawing on this music, bringing it together, or incorporating something means building a relationship between things that had no prior point of contact until then. Musically, I myself am interested in adding to the new combinations of past things yet another new creation.

TAKEMURA: Neither density, nor lightness.

ISHII: When I work, I work hard. I think I'm both easy-going and hard-working.

TAKEMURA: Thank you.

(Tokyo, 3 October 1997)

Ken ISHII: Born in 1970 in Sapporo, Japan. Musician. The demo tape recorded at home when he was a university student became the occasion for his debut in Holland. He became extremely popular in Europe after signing a contract with R&S, an independent label in Belgium. His representative work is "JELLY TONES".

TAKEMURA Mitsuhiro: Born 1954. Associate professor at Kyoto University of Art and Design. A theorist of media aesthetics and electronic-network society. Published works include *Media

Ecstasy* (Seidosha) and
Digital Japanesque (NTT Publishing).

Notes:

1: Baggy, thick, knee-high tube socks popular among high school girls.

2:Customized photo booths made by Sega Enterprises, which produce photos in the form of stickers.

3: DJ parties became popular in Goa, India. These parties, in turn, created a unique style of music, which has come to be known as the "Goa sound" or "psychedelic trance."

4: Animator. Artistic director for OTOMO Katsuhiro's "Akira". His works, which exceeded the traditional domain of animation, include "EXTRA," "Eikyu kazoku" (Eternal Family), and "Onkyo seimeitai noizu man"(Noise man, living body of sound). His works are shown in Digi-VISIONS: Otomo Katsuhiro and the New Digital Generation (Shibuya PARCO, Part 3, 5 December 1997-8 January 1998)

5: A music clip from "JELLY TONES"

6: A kind of breeding game in which electronic, pocket-size toy monsters are collected, raised, and then made to battle other monsters.