Rhythms, Textures, Identities: Folding as a Technique in Kyoka's Signature Sound

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Watching Kyoka's "Boiler Room Tokyo Live Set" on Boiler Room's YouTube channel subjects me to a sense of corporeal physical force. A wall of sound, quite literally, seems to be flowing out of my browser. I listen on headphones from home, not even at high volume, and yet Kyoka's recorded performance is forceful and present. Both the original performance itself as I perceive it through its mediation on YouTube as well as the recording thereof bespeak a slight degree of distortion, and a densely populated sonic frequency spectrum. The simultaneity of rhythm and textural density in her performance I will come to describe as a "fold" – an idiosyncratic technique that connects sonic matter, formal shape, and a performative agenda within the performance. To me, the physical force that is being produced here is at once distressing *and* addictive. I cannot judge on the original performance, as the only document I have at my disposal is the online document stemming from the artist Kyoka's pre-pandemic Tokyo performance. I recommend you to play this video on YouTube at around 36:00 minutes, toward the end, for a maximum effect of physicality and sonic density.

Figure 1: Kyoka performing for Boiler Room in Tokyo, 2017, screenshot from YouTube (Kyoka Boiler Room Tokyo Live Set)

What I see in this video is a performer who virtuosically and fluently plays an array of equipment positioned in front of her on the tabletop – synthesizers, drum machines, MIDI controllers, and a laptop computer. As I continue watching, I notice how that equipment, too, is subjected to the physical force of her performance. Some shots in the video reveal that the Roland MC-09 Phrase Lab, a dated desktop synthesizer made between 2002 and 2004 ("Roland MC-09 Phrase Lab Desktop Synthesizer Module"), is vibrating in the rhythm of Kyoka's bass pattern. This fact I understand as a sign for the extremely high sound volume at which the artist was playing. More so, I also take notice of the particular club setting that Boiler Room has given rise to: the artist looking at, and

performing entirely for, the main camera, while a dancing audience (yet indeed they are co-performers) is behind her, facing her back yet also dancing for the camera – a setup that is heavily geared toward an online audience and might appear less authentic to actual club goers (Heuguet 81).

On a closer look, while watching for the nth time, I start to study Kyoka's interaction with the equipment. She is pushing buttons, mainly on the MC-09, in a quite direct rhythmic manner, and she is frenetically rotating several knobs. She sometimes touches her computer, too, but more often watches the computer screen, potentially visually navigating her set and her sounds. The result of her interaction, as I described afore, is a flowing yet rhythmic, or rhythmicized stream of sonic matter. I purposely write "matter" because of the extreme spectral, timbral, and temporal density. That which reaches my ear touches me on a quite material, corporeal level, to say the least. It is hard to tell whether the amount of distortion toward the end of her set stems from her live performance or from YouTube's processing. Yet, it may point to the fact that the sound pressure was effectively high – so high that that it may have exceeded that which the sound engineers would have expected to happen, resulting in an overdriven stream to their online viewers. Or, it might be a purposeful part of the artist's agenda.

What I am getting at is that I believe Kyoka's music (and performance) to be peculiar and intricate, and so this paper serves me to develop some notes towards Kyoka's idiosyncratic technique that I call "folding," – loosely borrowing from Deleuze's theoretical concept of an *existence in connection*, which at times might also relate to a corporeal, more material-bodily structure (Deleuze). Using the concept of folding, I aim to demonstrate how Kyoka, as I argue, is capable of creating the unique composite of rhythms, textures, and identities that she is performing (with) in the moment of performing.

I argue that the technique of "folding" is crucial to Kyoka's music as it enables her to blend disparate materials with one another on a sonic-material level within the texture of the music itself. Folding, then, is a technical method, executed primarily in software and hardware, in which distinct sound sources are interwoven and blended – or "folded" – so that multiple temporalities, sonic qualities, and timbres can co-exist rather than be normalized into a singular sonic aesthetic – similar to what Kramer describes for what he calls "postmodern concepts of musical time" in which "The temporality … is thus deeply multiple" (Kramer 43). Yet, folding I understand not solely as a technical approach to dealing with one's material economy – but also as a way for Kyoka to blend identity and politics into the sonic matter. Kyoka makes use of this strategy in an empowering way – I believe – because it enables her to establish a position for herself that permanently escapes all sorts of easy classification, as I will explain in more detail.

If we listen into Kyoka's performance again, but this time at around 7:00 minutes, I may ask you a simple sounding, solfeggio style question: what is it that we hear? Is it beats, is it chords, pads, harmonic progressions, rhythmic patterns, variations thereof, melodies, or bass lines? To me, the answer is clear: all of that. All musical functions are being covered, even if her music is devoid of a traditional instrumentation. In this sense, it is an additive layered compound made of drumbeats, bass lines, melodies, chords, and effects. That all necessary musical functions are covered is proven by the simple yet potent fact that indeed, the audience *is* dancing along at Boiler Room – and dancing would look differently were there no main regulating pulse involved as Vijay Iyer calls it (Iyer 396). Nonetheless, there is a degree of perceptual ambiguity that makes it hard to distinguish between the individual components in the texture. This ambiguity has to do with both the immense rhythmic and spectral density, as well as with the fast and frenetic cutting of the materials. The computational detection of rhythmic onsets in the bespoken moment at around 7:00 minutes, displayed in figure 2, shows an astonishingly dense sonic fabric with innumerous rhythmic onsets. Note that with a more traditional piece of popular music you would get a quite regular looking rhythmic grid in 4/4 with standard subdivisions.

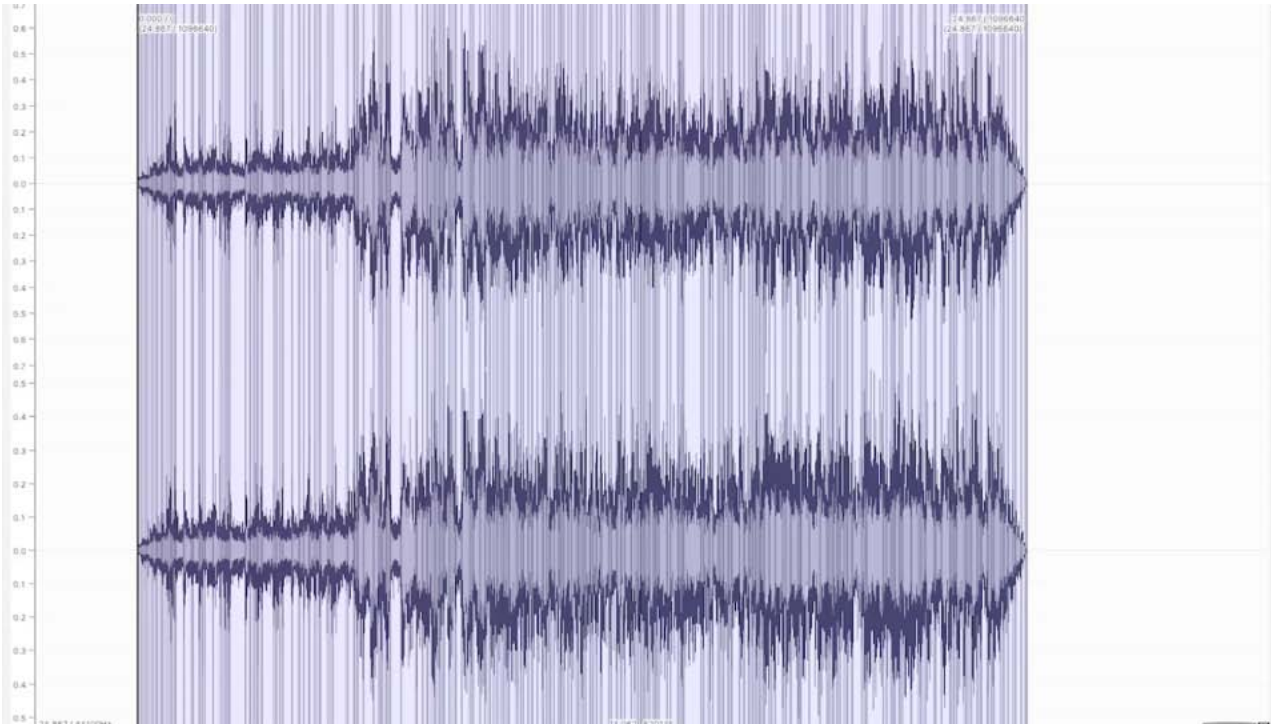

Figure 2: A 25 second (or 14 measure) excerpt from Kyoka's performance, at around 7:00 minutes, rhythmically analyzed with Sonic Visualiser (screenshot by the author)

It is Kyoka's crafting of this dense sonic and rhythmic fabric, made of disparate musical and non-musical materials – the fold. Following my description of Kyoka's "Toy Planet" as "textural sampling" and "frenetic cutting technique" elsewhere (Zaes). Her fabric folds distinct sound materials by bringing them in relationship with one another while maintaining their individual existence. We could almost *unfold* Kyoka's texture at a later time – at least in our imagination. This relationship is crafted by fast and frenetically cutting back and forth between the materials, so that they are seemingly rendered a part of the same: they literally touch one another, while they maintain their independent characteristics. The resulting spectrogram in figure 3 visually depicts the dense sonic fabric that Kyoka produces.

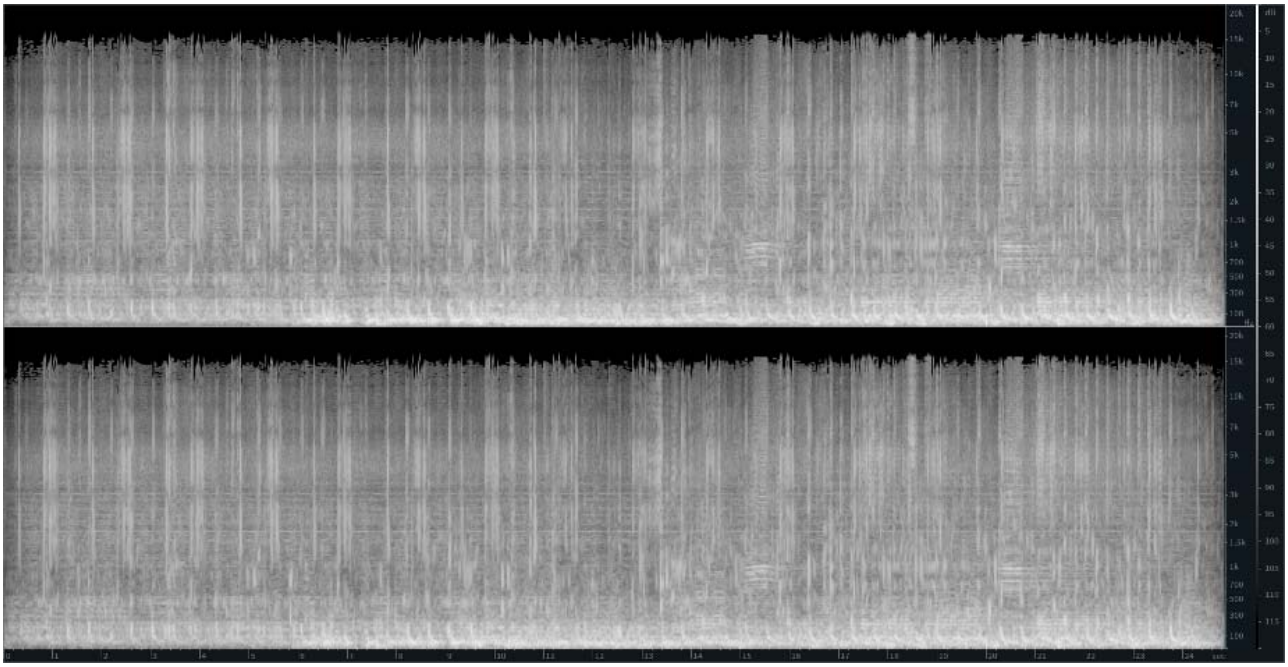

Figure 3: Spectrogram of the same musical moment at around 7:00 minutes, made with iZotope RX (screenshot by the author)

Several sources point to the fact that Kyoka uses synthesizer sounds, her own vocal snippets, and field recordings as her primary materials – particularly field recordings that she records herself in large urban centers. She then meticulously arranges her materials on a timeline, a process that is vaguely documented in the short corporate movie "One Thing: Kyoka – Exploring Noise" that the Berlin-based Ableton company made about Kyoka's work (*One Thing*). But perhaps the most fascinating musical element in Kyoka's textural sound world are her beats. On closer analysis, I notice that they are far from being recorded drum beats, or a remediated versions thereof. No conventional drum samples or drum synthesis is used, I believe. Instead, there is material derived from noisy urban field-recordings that she shapes in the form of a musical beat; hence there is a mismatch between the outer musical time of that shape – the beat – and the inner texture of the material itself which is rhythmic and at times percussive in the first place – and yet is not in synchrony with the song's musical time. This observation algins with Kramer's description of a multiple musical time (that he calls "postmodern"), which "seems to proceed in more than one tempo simultaneously" (Kramer 49) and therefore exhibits "Intertextual references meaning different things to different listeners, depending on their previous experiences with the quoted material" (Kramer 53). The inner temporality of Kyoka's beats operate at a much higher pace than the musical time of her track; and so it is vaguely reminiscent of granular synthesis which is theorized by Roads and Gabor (Roads, "Introduction"; Roads, "Introduction to Granular Synthesis"; Gabor) – a technique to synthesize sonic matter by cutting and speeding up real-world recordings. Granular synthesis operates at the perceptual boundary between timbre and rhythm where it is unclear whether an extremely fast pulse is perceived as rhythm or as tone – indeed, where it can theoretically be perceived as both at once. But Kyoka's technique is different as it does not fully make the field recordings and the synthesizer samples disappear. Her technique just cuts them really fast, relating them with one another at once temporally in really fast sequence, and spectrally, in an actual, or only perceived, simultaneity. While Kyoka makes beats as do many other artists, her beats are crucially different from the contemporary EDM mainstream; her beats take on an ambiguous position between rhythm and timbre. This is the technique that I call "folding."

Figure 4: Kyoka as a field recordist in a generic urban space – probably Berlin, screenshot from YouTube (One Thing)

Kyoka's idiosyncratic folding technique does not come without political consequences. What I mean by "political" in this context is that her technique to treat the sonic materials makes them index something outside than themselves. And this is complex, because – as I have shown elsewhere (Zaes) – it is simiply impossible to pin these materials down since they are mostly field recordings from some generic, undisclosed urban settings, or samples from some quite unrecognizable synthesizers. There is also no inherent political agenda that the artist would overtly brings to us. And yet, I argue that folding equips Kyoka with the agency of positioning herself beyond or beneath a musical genre reference system and outside of any distinct mainstream. Avoiding conventional drum

machine beats puts her off the EDM map and shifts the circulation and reception of her music toward IDM and experimental music audiences. But at the same time, as we have seen, her music moves bodies, her tempo references the BPM of dance music; it literally makes people dance, and puts her in large international venues such as Boiler Room Tokyo. With this folding technique, she thus positions herself at once inside and outside the binary between popular and experimental, potentially speaking to different audiences with the same musical material. Kyoka is both at the edge of, and slightly inside, anti-establishment and DIY (do it yourself) culture. The hybrid she creates on a material level, she cleverly transposes onto the level of musical genre classification – or the resistance against it. More importantly, I see this as an agentic move with which she distinguishes herself from the typically white, male, middle-class counterparts in electronic music that dominate the international stages.

As a result, her sonic texture is rougher and rawer than that of the male dominated EDM-mainstream, a fact that elsewhere I have – perhaps ironically? – described as a "techno punk" (Zaes). Her sonic texture as much as her artist persona are hybrids – they are syntheses that produce something beyond the sum of their components. Tara Rodgers writes, building on Alexander Weheliye's work (Weheliye), that "sonic artifice – as it is so marked by distinctive timbral and tone-shaping dimensions of synthesized sound – is a machine-produced veneer that always reflects back on human conditions, relations, desires. Synthesized sounds themselves are complex nature-cultures – instances of the imploded and deeply interwoven categories of natural and cultural" (Rodgers, "Synthesis"). Elsewhere, Rodgers writes about the "technology of the amplitude envelope" (Rodgers, "What, for Me, Constitutes Life in a Sound?" 521) – a form of artificially shaping organic sound in time, for instance turning a field recording into a beat – and she writes that the vertical parameters of sound are physical, but the horizontal amplitude envelopes always reference back onto the human condition, through the human who is acting behind the machine. All of this points to the fact that Kyoka's music is overtly human, even though, or better, *exactly because* she shapes and folds her materials so audibly through machinic intervention – an intervention that she also performers live at Boiler Room.

Yet another approach to think about the political dimension of what I have described so far as Kyoka's signature sound: her performative intervention at Boiler Room. What I see her doing on stage is pressing buttons and rotating dials. In fact, she is primarily operating the same few buttons on a somewhat outdated retro instrument by the Roland corporation, a synthesizer that she most likely had connected to a computer containing much of her set. What I see here aligns with Mark Butler's ideas of live electronic music practices as the "coming unfixed of recordings" (Butler 9), as a constant negotiation between improvisation and fixed media. The performer, Kyoka, partly immerses herself into the sound being created with all its vibrational, affective potential as she is herself a dancer much like her audience; and yet partly she remains outside of what is going on – which is not to suggest that she might not always be in control, but rather points to the concept of deferred time of action in which the performer alternates between stretches of listening to create new ideas and periods of doing to take action on the next sonic turn, as Mark Butler explains (Butler 106). Kyoka is herself part of what Butler describes as the "experiential gaps that recordings open for listeners" (Butler 67). Playing buttons as a way of playing the unfixing of recordings on stage, I will also call playing the "remediation" instrument. Remediation, "the representation of one medium in another," as Bolter and Grusin argue, lies at the bottom of all new media (Bolter and Grusin 45). In Kyoka's performance, however, the process of remediation is intricate: what is it that is actually being remediated in her performance?

As I have argued earlier, it is not that Kyoka is remediating a human-played drum beat by way of playing it back from a drum sampler. Rather, what she is doing is manufacturing a copy of a textural beat to which there is no original at all. Her urban field recordings and synthesizer samples index less that which had been recorded in the first place – the city or the synthesizer – than the act of becoming remediation, since her technique becomes audible in itself. One could argue, of course, that her sampling technique indexes a history of appropriation and that her samples have been stripped of their credit. Hence, samples, even when processed so radically as in Kyoka's Boiler Room performance, will always remain samples, and as that, will index the history and technique of sampling. I understand Kyoka's attitude thus as the making hyper visible and audible her folding technique – and as a way of demonstrating her fluency while navigating her dense sonic matter in performance.

In conclusion, I read Kyoka's Boiler Room set as an ambiguous fold of sound materials, of musical genres, and of performative identities. She has carefully crafted an agentic position (realized in performance) that maintains, and reflects on, the ambiguous nature of this fold when she blends rhythms, textures, and identities in order to achieve what I call her "signature sound." When her performance ends quite abruptly on the YouTube feed, I am left with a sense of absence of sound – a void that opens up even deeper given this physical, corporeal, high-volume sonic texture that Kyoka has left us with.

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