

Breath Training Pool – Participant Experience Report

Participant Experience Report
By Ryoko Takeuchi

BECOMING A PERFORMER

After leaving the publishing company where I had worked for 33 years, I was enjoying a period of freedom when I learned that Kumiko Ueda was organizing another participatory project, following last year's reading workshop in Minato City. This time, we were told we could "become bacteria." I applied immediately.

Hibiya Park was a familiar place to me — somewhere I had visited to research in the library or eat bread before a performance. But to become bacteria there? Why? How? With many questions in mind, I arrived early at the designated meeting point.

Though it was May, the sun was already strong. After drinking warm water to prevent heatstroke, I fastened the small radio provided to my wrist. We moved to the azalea hill inside the park, and "something" began.

Guided by Mikiko Kawamura, dressed in white knitwear, we loosened our bodies as if becoming leaves. Then came breathing exercises: inhaling from our fingertips and exhaling from our toes; inhaling from our foreheads and exhaling from our hips — transforming into non-human beings. Sensitive to heat, I imagined myself as a light-averse bacterium.

"Let's drift gently in the pleasant breeze and move toward the pond," Kawamura's soft voice echoed in my ear. At first I was conscious of the gazes of passersby, but as I focused on my breathing, they no longer mattered.

By the pond, we communicated with aquatic organisms, eating light and grass as we drifted along a winding path like a small stream. Suddenly, the enormous Midtown Hibiya building appeared.

"Ta-da! That's Ophelia! You've all become such tiny creatures that she looks like Ophelia!" We looked up, dazzled by the building.

Soon we were told, "Now we will begin the performance." The building would be Ophelia. We, as small creatures, would enact her drowning. The "stage" was Mount Mikasa, where

spectators had gathered.

As we continued our bacterial breathing on the slope, Ophelia descended slowly from above. She slipped, falling in slow motion toward the river.

She was enormous. Some of us were caught in her fluttering eyelashes; others were swallowed by her struggling mouth. Eventually, she stopped breathing. A fragrance rose from her body. We devoured her, consumed her entirely — and lay back, full and satisfied, as the wind passed over the hillside.

BECOMING A SPECTATOR

On another day, I participated as a spectator, following the creatures while listening to a smartphone stream. Hibiya Park gathered tourists, office workers, protestors. Few people paid much attention to the swaying, rotating group moving through the park.

Through the headphones, a relaxed radio-like voice played, eventually merging with repeated descriptions of Ophelia's drowning from Hamlet, layered with contemporary sound. Listening from a distance, Kawamura truly appeared as a mad Ophelia wandering by the water.

It was astonishing how differently the landscape appeared through sound. Even the towering Midtown building felt artistic.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Initially, I expected to perform only once. Instead, I participated three times. With each repetition, the navigation and structure evolved. My breathing became freer. I felt secret communication with other "bacteria."

After one performance, several participants shared a meal and discussed our experiences. Though we had just met, we talked for hours. The 2,000 yen performance fee suddenly felt meaningful.

Director Ueda continually asked for feedback, even after performances. I was impressed — and slightly overwhelmed — by her relentless pursuit of refinement.

When I told others, "I became bacteria in Hibiya Park," some were unfazed; others recoiled. Perhaps there is meaning in that boundary — or perhaps not.

Having left my job the previous year, I joked that maybe I could also quit being human. Through this project, I felt freer than I had imagined possible.

Theatre, I realized, is not something merely watched from a seat. It is a multidimensional and ongoing experience.

When everything ended and we left the park, seeing Ueda, Kawamura, miu, and the staff sunburned and tired, I felt a small sense of sadness.