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A City Guide For Creative Tourist

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Seiko Mikami new installation commissioned by YCAM  
 三上晴子 新作インスタレーション展

## Markuz Wernli Saito

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Photo: Sonja Wenger (project “Forbidden Art”)

In the role as designer, artist and curator, Markuz Wernli Saito is experimenting with event-based projects that contain both social and cultural components. He established [Momentarium](#), an open, interdisciplinary laboratory that creates unusual platforms for sociability and networking within the lived and mediated spaces of Kyoto (and beyond). Through collaborative, public interventions outside of closed art institutions, ordinary Kyoto citizens are brought into an active, participating position in order to explore fresh interpretations of what is amidst everyday life.

### **Please tell us about yourself and your recent activity.**

Six years ago I took photographs for a book on the Japanese gardens of [Mirei Shigemori](#) where I was looking for a radically new, close-up approach of representing landscape design. Soon I realized that the instant connection with the people around me was extremely crucial for taking outstanding photographs. From that point on I started to create artful situations where people can enter my work, make use of it, and complete it. For me the art experience isn't located in the finished product but in opening up opportunities for unexpected connections and relationships that didn't exist before. In our present lives we are often distanced from direct experience, which is in particular true for the design and art world. With action-based initiatives like [Mobile Tea Ceremony](#), the [Payphone Memorial](#), or the [Guided Tour in the City Canal](#) my projects engage people through surprise and happenstance in the “First Life”, in the here-and-now (as opposed to virtual worlds like Second Life). It is this immediate presence that leads to

an experience we can possibly take back with us, and integrate into our own lives.

Recently I got interested in the creative potential of the many remnant spaces in Kyoto neighborhoods, these empty lots of real estate that remain unused often for decades after an old house has been demolished. Since gallery space is limited and expensive here, I established with friends the initiative [Curators Without Galleries](#), that explores fun and practical ways for (re) activating these dormant spaces between people and houses. I simply asked strangers how they would use such an empty leftover space (regardless of money or legal constraints). During these conversations I encouraged participants to prototype their visions with play dough and suddenly all these little sculptures of art were born! It was exciting for me to elevate 26 ordinary people into the role of artists. Given the right approach (simple, clear, unthreatening), people will tell you honestly what is needed in their lives. We were also able to secure a remnant space on a top location in Kyoto for the final [IN BETWEEN](#) exhibition that showcased the participant's visionary sculptures. Within just 10 days and with a shoestring budget we put together a fine exhibition from scratch and turned idle space (between houses and humans) into something alive for everybody involved.

### **Please tell us about Kyoto and how about living in the city for yourself/activity.**

I have lived in Kyoto for about six years and I am always amazed at the people, things, and places I have not yet discovered. If you go beneath the city's touristy surface you get a sense that Kyoto was originally built by hands and not money. I think that Kyoto is at its best where the present culture, traditions, and nature are interacting with each other. It is great to see for example, that temples like [Hounen-in](#) increasingly become centers of social connections, or that a good number of young, innovative "Kyotorians" keep craftsmanship and urban farming alive. There is a resurgence in small-scale agriculture and local food culture in the city which brings people together on a primary level. Kyoto is a complex society where people have distinct ties to their neighborhood, profession or social group. Myself as foreigner and artist I have the status of an outsider, which works to my advantage I think. Since I don't belong to the in-group (the majority), I have the ability to look at the situation possibly in a more unbiased, open way. Living in Kyoto gives me the "creative license" to be playful and experimental. For example, I can take the liberty to transplant the traditional tea ceremony from the teahouse onto a bustling street corner in downtown Kyoto and mix up tradition with contemporary life. These surprising shifts of experience in things we take for granted, can be truly live-changing.

### **What do you think about the art/design scene in the city?**

Kyoto is home of an incredible wealth of talented and creative people ranging from esteemed artisans all the way to hip manga animators. In many art schools traditional and digital arts are nurtured under the same roof. It gets really interesting when the borders between art, craft and design are blurred. The city-run [Kyoto Art Center](#) regularly puts up fine installation and performance work that intersect these different genres. Worth mentioning is also [Anewal Gallery](#) and its innovatory town festival Rakumachi Rakuya which encourages the public to interact with traditional architecture through all five senses. Another initiative that employs art for community building (or "machizukuri" in Japanese) can be found at the performance center [Atelier Gekiken](#) which opens its venue once a month for combined [organic farmer's market](#) and body workshop.

It is not easy to keep track of the numerous galleries and art cafés dotted throughout the city. When I want to know what's happening I prefer to tap into some of the networks among the creative people in town. Regularly I touch base with [Kissa Hanare](#) where a living room is turned into a kind of [Cafe Independants](#) on Monday nights – a social hub for local artists and designers to converse over an organic meal. Other important creative crossroads I find in the two independent bookstores [Keibunsha](#) – a must-go for art book lovers! – and [Green-e-Books](#) that actively contribute to the cultural fabric of Kyoto by hosting exhibitions and events. Last but not least, there are artist alliances like [THE MAP](#) which

coordinate dance, performance and video activities in a number of independent art spaces around the Nishijin area.

### Please tell us favourite places in Kyoto.

In Kyoto I find a lot of charm on the margins of the city. It is fascinating to walk on Shimodachiuri Street and head west from Senbon Street. It leads you into a part of Kamigyo Ward that hasn't seen much urban development and retained a lot of its original neighborhood character. If you venture a bit into the mountains that encircle the town you can still find the pristine spirit Kyoto is known for like a small, [mossy shrine](#) that's not on the tourist map. I also love the 'undefined creativity' of everyday life that is best discovered along small backstreets and [city canals](#). The many rivers and streams are very important for the social life of the city. No wonder that [Kamogawa river](#) is the favorite open-air hangout for picnics and ad-hoc concerts. Another great place where people are gathering around water are the bathhouses found in every neighborhood. I particularly like the older, slightly run-down baths from the Showa or Taisho period like the [Shirakawa Onsen](#) in the Sakyo Ward. When I want to get a glimpse from the local art and design scene, two spots are on top of my list: [Tranq Room](#) that houses a bar on the ground level, and is a live music salon and gallery on the second floor. And [efish](#) that lets you enjoy the view of Kamogawa River over a delicious drink or meal. The café's interior was designed by Shin Nishibori and there is a variety of art and craft items on display.

#### [Markuz Wernli Saito](#)

Born 1968 in Baden, Switzerland, Markuz is a photo and design contributor of [Kyoto Journal](#) and [Kansai Timeout](#) and a member of Kansai International Photographer's Association. He is the co-founder of the Z+E+M Public Art Collective that received "special mention" (top five project entry) at the [2009' IDENSITAT](#) art festival in Sondika, Spain. Markuz' "design-powered" networking projects, performances and video work has been featured worldwide at art venues and film festivals and were supported by the [Swiss Arts Council](#).

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