

Ha, Thu-Huong, *Yuko Mohri is a maestro of unstable elements*, *The Japan Times*, 1 November 2024

thejapanimes

CULTURE / Art

Yuko Mohri is a maestro of unstable elements

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Nov 1, 2024

Two years ago at a storage facility in an undisclosed location somewhere in Japan, Yuko Mohri was allowed a rare peek at the underside of Constantin Brancusi's "The Kiss." Later, she bent over to get a better look at the watercolor gradient in Francis Picabia's "Animation." Her task was to choose from the nearly 3,000 artworks belonging to the Ishibashi Foundation, which began from the private collection of Bridgestone founder Shojiro Ishibashi, and to put them in dialogue with her own work for a new exhibition. There were Picassos, Longquan ware, an O'Keeffe to consider, but the ostensibly illustrious job had its challenges.



Yuko Mohri uses "invisible forces" — gravity, weather, air, magnetic fields — to create jazzy kinetic sculptures. | Lance Henderstein

Because this isn't how Mohri operates. Nothing about the artist is conducive to conservation or preservation. As soon as she sets her works into motion, they began to move away from her, shifting, breaking down and renewing.

I meet Mohri in her studio in east Tokyo, a clean, newly renovated white walled space — for now, anyway, as the artist's mess has been slowly expanding since she moved in. Books spill out of a back room, a bench drill sits on a table next to another surface covered with circuit boards, and tucked against a wall is a terrazzo beam with cables running through it. "It's a bit dangerous," she warns when I lean over to get a better look.

The 44-year-old is warm and down to earth, with an easy staccato laugh. She has a neat, straw yellow blond bob and wears a ruffle sleeved black blouse and black slacks. In snakeskin-patterned platform boots, she still cuts a petite figure, possibly because she's also dwarfed by a massive Tatlin-esque rotary speaker mounted on a wooden tripod. She arrives a few minutes late and walks in the door apologizing. "I overslept," she whispers with a hint of mischief.

Fair enough. Anyone would need sleep after the whirlwind two years that Mohri has had. Last year, on the opening day of South Korea's storied Gwangju Biennale, where Mohri was showing her installation "I/O," she got a call that she'd been chosen to represent Japan at the Venice Biennale, one of the world's most important art events. Now as the exhibition enters its final month, Mohri prepares to open her first large-scale solo show in Japan, "Jam Session Mohri Yuko — On Physis," which opens at the Ishibashi Foundation's Artizon Museum on Nov. 2.

The exhibit contains 11 pieces by Mohri, including updated site-specific versions of previous installations and two works being shown for the first time. Cords, tubes and cables run all throughout the room ("Cables are the best!"), making the gallery of metal appliances, modern paintings and sculptures, and clinking clanking ambient sounds feel connected by one system.

As much as the exhibit's scale has proved daunting, so has finding ways for Mohri's chaotic, leaky, jazz-like installations to share space with century-old paintings that require a great degree of control.

"They really don't want rotting fruits next to Monet!" Mohri says.

Indeed, there were times the process seemed antithetical to the artist's philosophy. But through physical touch, Mohri found ways to connect to what otherwise seemed like dead paintings by dead men. For her new piece "Piano Solo: Belle-Ile," she traveled for two days to the island off the coast of Brittany, France, to stand where Claude Monet did when he looked out at the sea that would become "Belle-Ile, Rain Effect" in 1886. When she understood how physically dangerous it was to stand in that spot when it was raining, the work and Monet's struggle to create it, came alive.

"Paintings are kind of frozen," she says. "But at one time the artist really existed, and they tried to make their works with passion. It was really raw."

Mohri was born in 1980 and grew up in a conservative family of teachers in Fujisawa, Kanagawa Prefecture. Her grandparents were Buddhist monastics, and her family house was a temple where kids gathered for Sunday school.

Mohri played piano for 12 years and in high school experimented with trumpet, horn and drums, but never stuck to one. She hung out in vinyl shops, exploring the textures of the sounds she heard. She drew inspiration from Japanese noise music and artists like John Cage, Eiko Ishibashi, Jim O'Rourke and Yoshihide Otomo. In college she was in an improvised punk band, but performing was tiring — contrary to her effervescent demeanor, Mohri says she's actually quite shy, and she had to drink to gather the courage to get on stage.

In 2000, she started her undergraduate degree at Tama Art University, where there was a new department for new media art and sound installation. She was deeply interested in "invisible forces" — gravity, weather, air, magnetic fields — and how she could make them visible.

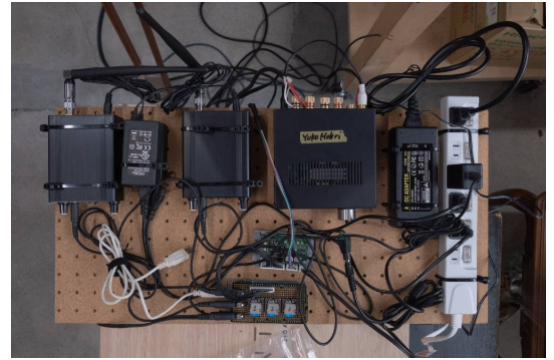
Despite her atmospheric preoccupations, Mohri is deeply grounded. She has little interest in lofty "isms." She doesn't like identifying as a "Japanese artist," nor does she call her work feminist or ecological.

"I want to be unrelated to nationality or gender, just 'Mohri.' ... Like a *yuru kyara* or something," she says, using the word for Japan's ubiquitous cartoony costumed mascots, and cracking herself up.

For her art school thesis she built a sculpture that ran on magnetic forces, normally unseen but which she showed through coils. Her teacher called it a science experiment. Mohri was disappointed, but remained convinced she was onto something.

Twenty-one years later, "Magnetic Organ" will premiere at her solo show at Artizon. Antennae create barely perceivable magnetic fields that travel through a set of coils, amplifying the movements further and generating sound.

Through their use of simple objects like cones and umbrellas, Mohri's works are universally accessible and approachable. But the way they turn on themselves, physically, energetically and temporally, this is her "revolution," as Mohri puts it — one achieved through small, everyday rotations.



"Jam Session Mohri Yuko — On Physis" is the artist's first large-scale solo show in Japan. | Lance Henderstein



For her "Decomposition" series, Mohri sources local fruits and connects them to circuit boards, light bulbs and speakers. | Lance Henderstein



"Cables are the best!" says the artist. Her works often create a feeling of circulation and connected systems. | Lance Henderstein

For Venice, Mohri chose to work with Sook-Kyung Lee, director of the Whitworth Gallery in Manchester, England, and curator of the 2023 Gwangju Biennale. Lee is the first non-Japanese curator of the Japan Pavilion, a reflection in part of Mohri's global outlook. She feels hamstrung by the idea that a Japanese artist should only work with Japanese collaborators and make art about Japanese issues.

Other than a few stints at residencies, Mohri has never lived abroad, but she's taught herself a fair amount of English, somewhat rare in the insular contemporary Japanese art scene, to say nothing of the traditional arts. She's also active on social media, presenting a goofy and personable Mohri to her 11,000 Instagram followers.

Mohri's warmth, open curiosity and preternatural knack for making friends with strangers is key to her labor-intensive practice, which usually involves extensive local research. The budget for the biennale was very tight, but Mohri convinced the Japan Foundation that transporting herself from Tokyo to Venice to source her materials would be cheaper than shipping finished works.

Mohri spent a total of two months in a self-assigned residency, treating the pavilion as a studio more than a gallery, roaming the city in search of material inspiration, developing relationships with local grocers and observing the space across seasons and various states of weather.

"I see her practice as a continuous thing. She keeps revisiting her previous ideas," says Lee. "Chronology doesn't quite work with Yuko; she's constantly thinking about everything all at once."

"Compose" combines her series "More More (Leaky)" and "Decomposition." The former, which won Mohri the Grand Prix at the 2015 Nissan Art Awards, is a kinetic sculpture improvised from everyday objects Mohri found around Venice — plastic piping and sheets, pans, buckets, funnels — which leaks and plugs itself, creating a circulating system of water. For "Decomposition," Mohri sourced damaged fruits from markets and connected them to circuit boards, light bulbs and speakers. As the fruits decay their moisture levels change, which in turn creates sounds and causes the lights to blink on and off.

Over the years she's gotten used to fielding panicked calls from the staff overseeing her work on the ground: Um, the pear's moldy — what should we do? Help, it rained over the weekend and now the paper's jammed!

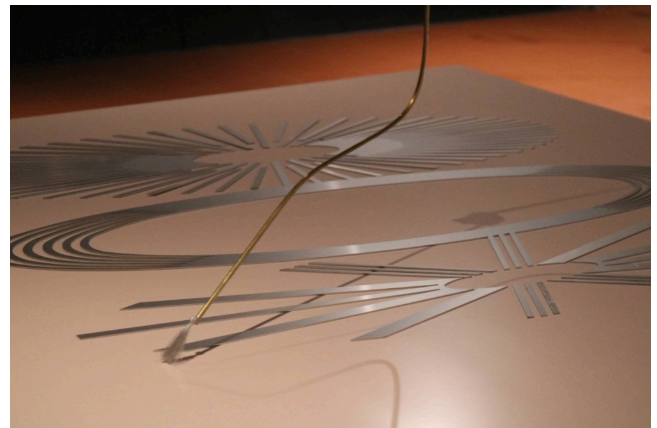
"In art history, most museums are focused on keeping (the works in their) original condition, on conservation, on how to keep the works eternally," says Mohri. "But my topic is the complete opposite, I'm really interested in how the situation is changing." She tells her support staff to let the chaos run its course; by the end of a festival, they usually know the work better than she does. "Oh, they've done watermelon again!" she mimes herself checking Instagram.

The Japan Pavilion has a square hole in the ceiling and in the floor, which Mohri embraced, having them kept open to let in light, rain and wind directly into the gallery space. The results are something like hydro-jazz, elemental live performance.

"I've always been interested in unstable elements," she says. "I create the basis of the installation, but how it reacts and expresses itself is still developing. There are new fruits and new weather happening all the time. And the season is changing, the temperature is changing, the moisture level is changing."

With visitors to the pavilion reaching 90,000 in September, Venice marks a huge moment in Mohri's career. Next spring she'll teach her last semester at Tokyo University of the Arts (TUA) and switch to her practice full-time. So it's with some guilt that I ask the inevitable: What's next? During the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, she says, she escaped the city and spent time in the woods, making recordings and making fires. This "time off" helped her generate so many ideas, she says, that for her next big project what she needs is a big holiday.

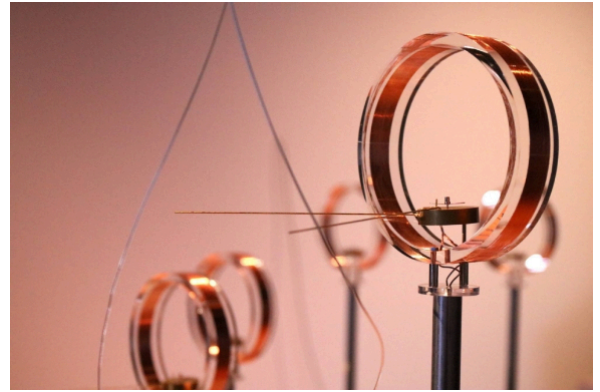
Mohri sees herself as more experimenter than expert. She has two modes of working: Gathering, investigating, collecting and listening, and back in her workshop, modifying, tinkering and experimenting —



As a teen, Mohri explored different musical instruments not to master them but to understand their various textures. | Zoria Petkoska

the “make, fail, make, fail” phase. These days she splits her time between her studios in Tokyo and the TUA Toride Campus in Ibaraki Prefecture, which means home can just be home — much to the relief of her book editor partner. “A long time ago, my studio was my bedroom,” she says. “My partner was really upset about all the tiny pieces of metal on the floor! He said, ‘This is too dangerous.’”

At home, Mohri watches movies and reads books. “Actually, I watch books,” she says. She means that she looks through art books for inspiration, but I sense more in this simple statement. For Mohri, everyday objects are not constrained by their original purposes: A cantaloupe is a source of electricity; an umbrella is a drum; a feather duster is a dancer. As such, every new object that crosses her path is something whose properties are waiting to be thoroughly investigated. “I don’t have any proper materials,” she says. “Fruit, furniture, paper, empty cans — I touch all materials.”



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“Jam Session: The Ishibashi Foundation Collection × Mohri Yuko — On Physis” runs from Nov. 2 through Feb. 9 at the Artizon Museum in Chuo Ward, Tokyo. For more information, visit artizon.museum/en. Yuko Mohri’s exhibition at the Japan Pavilion of the 60th Venice Biennale is on view through Nov. 24. For more information, visit venezia-biennale-japan.jp/e.
