

King, Elaine A., *Circulating Energy: A Conversation with Yuko Mohri*, *Sculpture Magazine* vol.43 no.5, September / October 2024

sculpture



I/O,
2017.
View of installation
in "Pleased to Meet
You," Museum
of Contemporary Art
Tokyo, 2019.

Circulating Energy:

A Conversation
with Yuko Mohri

by Elaine A. King

MASARU YANAGIBA, COURTESY THE ARTIST, PROJECT FULFILL ART SPACE, MOTHER'S TANKSTATION, YUTAKA KIKUTAKE GALLERY, TANVA BONAKDAR GALLERY

Translation from Japanese by Gaku Kondo



Yuko Mohri creates kinetic sound installations from reconfigured audio components and found everyday objects—everything from discarded furniture, motors, and rolls of paper to light bulbs and water. Networked assemblages that respond to the context in which they are fabricated, her multi-sensory environments form unique and changeable energy courses, their infrastructures characterized by chance, spontaneity, and discovery.

Though her visually exhilarating works often touch on serious issues, they also project an intelligent playfulness. This is certainly true of “Compose,” her two-part exhibition for the Japan national pavilion at the Venice Biennale, created with items collected around the city. In the first part, inspired by leaks in the Tokyo subway system and Venice’s rising water level, recirculating water seeps and drips to move objects and create sound. An aroma of decay pervades the second part. Arranged on old wooden furniture, covered with insects, and oozing liquid, rotting fruit hooked up to electrodes (and a concealed computer) powers a fluctuating soundscape and flickering illumination. In these and other works, Mohri captures the fragility of life as an invigorating dynamic—a transformation of the ordinary into a mischievous ecology that changes and is changed by surrounding space.

Elaine A. King: [How did you become interested in kinetic art?](#)

Yuko Mohri: Just before college, I discovered that the kind of music I loved could also be art. The work of Christian Marclay, Carsten Nicolai, and Ryoji Ikeda, all of whom were originally musicians, began to be shown in exhibitions around the late 1990s. At that time, I learned the term “sound installation” and realized that sound could be part of an artwork. I wasn’t interested in producing “contemporary art,” though. My motivation was to do something that no one had done before, using sound equipment—speakers, amplifiers, scanners, and computers—as material. Whether something like that should be called art, music, or body art was not yet determined. It was still an undifferentiated and loosely cross-disciplinary field. I felt close to people who were working across genres and aimed to be such a person myself. I started with a vague desire to be an artist, making gadgets with kinetic components and doing performances with them. Today, I often show

yuko mohri ■

my work in museums, but back then, I thought it was uncool. Making fun stuff happen with my friends, whenever and wherever we could—that kind of punk attitude was more important to me.

There was a neighborhood in Tokyo called Akihabara, where you could find stores selling electronic parts and devices as well as junk, stores that had been around since the black market days after World War II. I spent a lot of time there and got all kinds of stuff for a fraction of the regular price. I would ask the staff how to use things, take them apart, and short them out. I learned

the basics of electronics and the structure of the components by playing with them. That was my first art practice, and my current style has grown out of it.

Along with Akihabara, Tokyu Hands was a major factor in the early stages. It's like any other DIY store now, but back then it was a special place with a small army of consultants ready to walk you through how to assemble things. I could get essential advice on how to use resin, cut iron, and other technical details that should be taught at art college. Today, you would probably watch YouTube videos.

OPPOSITE:
Decomposition,
2022.

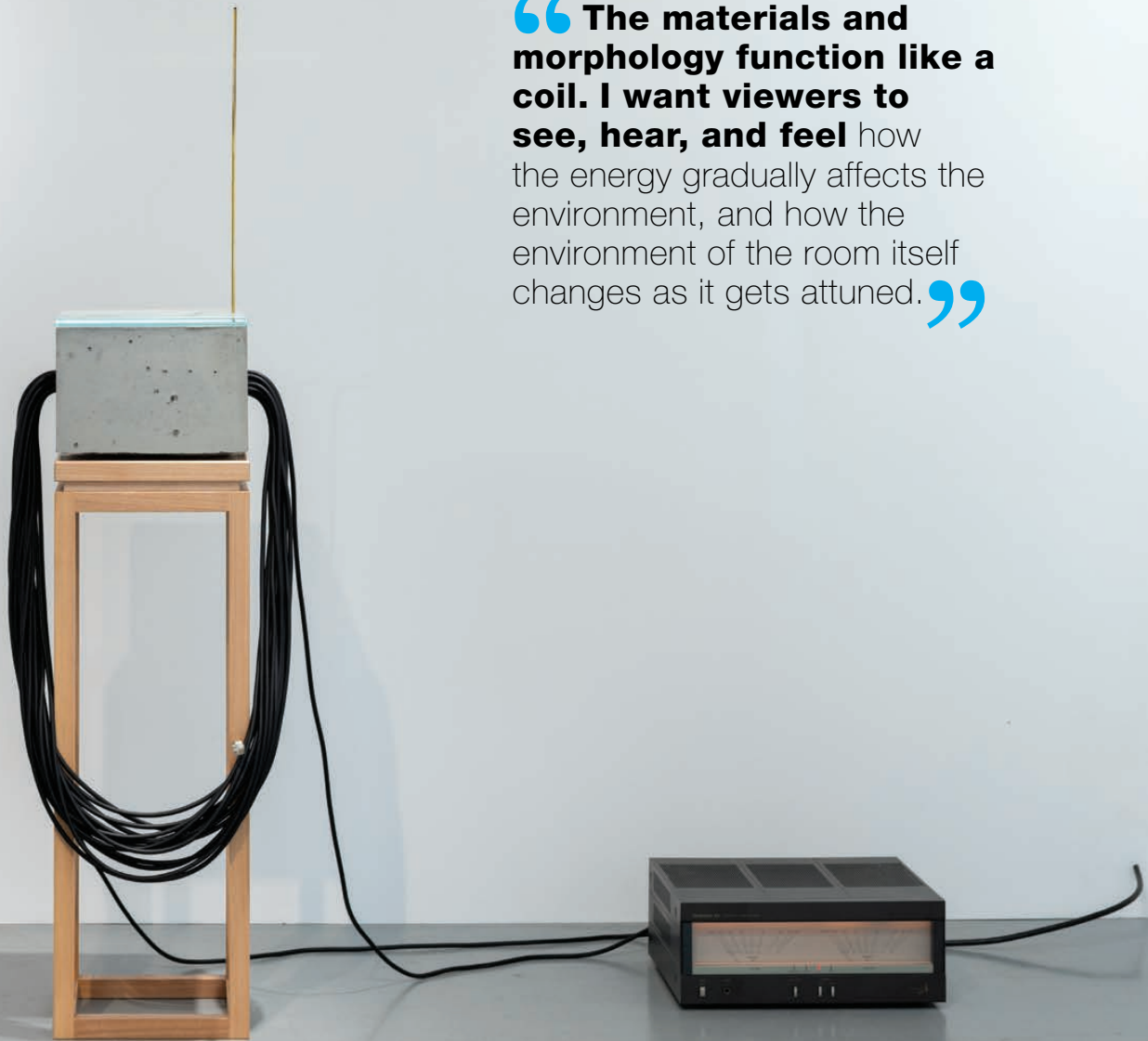
2 views of installation
in "Art and New Ecology,"
The 5th Floor, Tokyo.

THIS PAGE:
Moré Moré (Leaky):
The Falling
Water Given #4-6,
2017.

View of installation
at the 14th Biennale
de Lyon, France.



“ **The materials and morphology function like a coil. I want viewers to see, hear, and feel** how the energy gradually affects the environment, and how the environment of the room itself changes as it gets attuned. ”



yuko mohri ■



EAK: Your artistic method is deeply rooted in a fascination with the concept of circuits and inter-connectivity. How do you use these ideas?

YM: When I think of circuits, the first thing that comes to mind is an electronic board. It looks like a maze or a map, but it's different. Simply going from start to finish does not generate anything; an effect is produced only when electricity keeps going round and round inside the circuit. My installations are exactly the same. The effect emerges gradually as energy courses through the circuit again and again. Some people see my work as a kind of Rube Goldberg machine, but such a contraption has a beginning, an end, and a purpose. My work has none of those.

Because my installations are a kind of circuit, or coil, I wanted to see what kind of effects circulating energy would produce. I once organized a series of three consecutive exhibitions called "Circuit," "Circle," and "Circus." A coil, to me, is a very mysterious object, and the circle as a form interests me. I'm also interested in

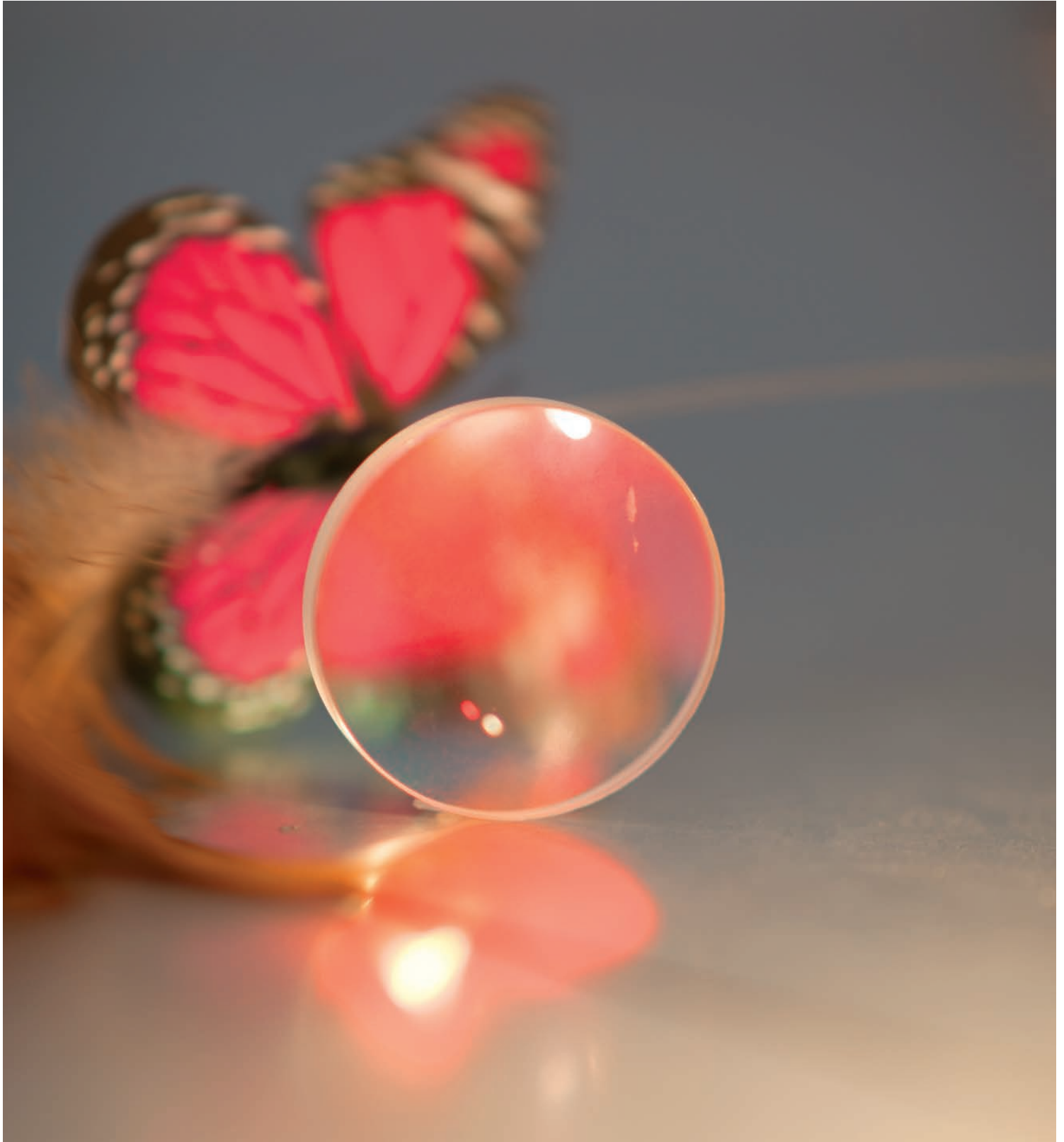
perpetual motion machines, but they're very difficult to make—the environment has to be extremely pure. In "Circuit," I secretly tried to make a perpetual motion machine. But no matter how small, thin, or invisible the substance—my fingerprints, dust in the room—something always generates friction, which reduces energy. I understood early on that perpetual motion is hard. At the same time, I also understood that a situation with friction, i.e., "noise," is more exciting than purity. That's what I meant by the title of my 2019 solo show, "Assume That There Is Friction and Resistance."

EAK: What comes first in your process, idea or object/installation? How do ideas and materials interact in the evolution of a site-specific work?

YM: The emphasis varies from project to project, but in every case, site-specificity is very important to me. When I first learned about site-specific art, I found it interesting and strange. Tadashi Kawamata, for instance, brought chairs out of a historic church and

OPPOSITE:
Voluta,
2019.
View of installation
in "summer rains,"
SCAI THE
BATHHOUSE, Tokyo.

THIS PAGE:
Voluta,
2017.
View of installation
in "MOT Satellite
Spring 2017,"
F Residence, Tokyo.



yuko mohri ■

built a wall with them. I was taught that this kind of installation is site-specific—it can only be made on that particular spot, being a combination of the specificity of place and of materials. But, for me, Kawamata's work seemed to have too much "human" meaning. Things like church chairs were too charged in terms of symbolism, history, and intention for me to handle as objects. I wanted "site-specific" to mean something more concrete—the environment itself. What would happen if you used the same equipment to produce sound in a place with echoes, like a church, and in a small room with no reverberation at all? In other words, when I was younger, Alvin Lucier's *I am sitting in a room* was far more "site-specific" to me than Kawamata's work.

EAK: Lucier was a pivotal figure in post-John Cage, American music. I can see how his inquiry into the spatial and physical properties of sound would appeal to you.

YM: Even the white cube of a gallery or museum, generally seen as a neutral space, reveals a wide range of properties—air from the AC, natural light in some rooms, differences in reverberation, the dust and dirt that people bring with them. But these elements are ignored, treated as if they don't exist. Viewers play dumb and pretend not to notice them because they are "noise" to the viewing experience. Yet these are precisely the factors that can make a work site-specific. My work picks up these invisible or disregarded elements and amplifies their effects—for example, making air currents visible, using dust to make lights flicker, and modulating output according to the amount of natural light captured by a sensor. For me, a site-specific installation has come to mean such things. The result is a work that responds to each display with a different output. It began with one of my earliest works, *vexations—c. i. p.* (*Composition in Progress*), which references Erik Satie.

EAK: I perceive a kinship with Process artists such as Eva Hesse and Bruce Nauman, who championed spontaneity, improvisation, and untraditional materials. Do you feel a connection with such open-ended approaches to making?

YM: I feel a great affinity with the work of Eva Hesse, Nauman is one of my heroes, and I am clearly influenced by Fluxus—especially Nam June Paik, Takehisa Kosugi,



and Shigeko Kubota. Although this may be too simplistic, I would say that in Asia there was less emphasis on permanence and more on process, as compared to European and American art of the 1970s. Mono-ha—or "Object School"—may seem like a Japanese version of Minimalism, but artists such as Lee Ufan and Kishio Suga stressed the visibility of the process of making. There was a dynamic point of view. They asked what would happen when you *place* things. Likewise, you won't grasp the meaning of my work just by looking at the objects. The materials and morphology function like a coil. I want viewers to see, hear, and feel how the energy gradually affects the environment, and how the environment of the room itself changes as it gets attuned.

EAK: You perceive sound as a sculptural component that interacts with the other elements in your work. Can you elaborate on your concept of sound and how you use it?

YM: In my work, kinetic sculpture meets sound installation. Anything that moves inevitably causes friction with something and generates sound, so sound is one manifestation of the energy going around the circuit. Suppose you put a mallet on a motor to make a device that strikes a piano keyboard.

OPPOSITE AND THIS PAGE:
Installation views of "Circus," Bloomberg Pavilion, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2012.



The motor stirs into movement and the mallet hits the keys, making sounds on the piano. At this point, the audience tries to hear only the sound of the piano; but, for me, the hum of the motor is just as important. I want both to be heard equally, and that's characteristic of how I handle sound in my installations. The important thing, again, is the presence of "noise." I am not trying to set melody against noise—one is as much "sound" as the other—but a lot of people persist in subjugating noise to melody. Giving equal importance to the piano and the motor is closely related to the post-Cage context of listening. I attach great significance to the noise generated by

the work precisely because it is considered non-existent and ignored in "right" viewing or listening.

EAK: *In //O (2011), an early installation, rolls of white paper cascade down from the ceiling to the floor, moving in a coil. What powers this work, and what role does sound play?*

YM: Dust is picked up by the paper rolls, read by the sensor, and converted to electricity. The process is repeated many times and gradually feeds back into the work, like a circuit. If you go from start to finish once, you can't possibly pick up fine particles; going round and round dramatically

OPPOSITE: GIMWORKERS. COURTESY THE ARTIST; PROJECT FULLILL ART SPACE, MOTHER'S TANKSTATION, YUTAKA KIKUTAKE GALLERY, TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY / THIS PAGE: TOR SIMEN
 ULSTEIN. COURTESY THE ARTIST; PROJECT FULLILL ART SPACE, MOTHER'S TANKSTATION, YUTAKA KIKUTAKE GALLERY, TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY



increases your odds—entropy is at the heart of *I/O*.

Sound is one of the effects of the dust picked up by the paper, just like the light bulb turning on and off. Sometimes unintended sounds can occur—the paper rustling as it grazes the floor or the motor uttering strange noises when the paper, swollen with absorbed moisture, gets stuck in it—and they add richness.

Visually, *I/O* references automatic pianos or tapes for old computers, and the paper-feeding mechanism was inspired by printers. An early version turned lights on and off by scanning a strip of paper on which I had drawn or punched holes. But when you actively put something on paper like that, it takes on a meaning of its own. Since I didn't become an artist to make drawings or do calligraphy, I was intensely uncomfortable with the idea of the paper being an expression in itself. I wanted to leave it to the environment to determine what would be inscribed, independent of my intentions. So, I turned to seismographs and hygrometers, which translate shifts in the environment into waving lines, directly recording them on paper.

EAK: *Voluta* (2017), which you made following a 2016 residency at Camden Arts Centre in London, connected the environmental and the architectural, using light, sound, and space. What were the ideas behind it?

YM: Most of the rooms at the Centre are bare white cubes, but one retains Victorian features in its windows and columns. It has beautiful light, high ceilings, and good acoustics, so I put everything I wanted to do into

it. “*Voluta*” describes the whorl ornament on column capitals and similar carvings on the scrolls of string instruments. It’s also known as arabesque, shared by East and West since ancient times via the Silk Road. An abstraction of a vine or shell growing in the form of a spiral, it symbolizes eternal energy—a circuit. Though I try to address the effects of energy continuously traveling through circuits, the energy itself is not tangible. I had always felt frustrated at not being able to see it, and I was deeply moved by the fact that this energy had already been turned into a design in the distant past.

EAK: In *Moré Moré (Leaky): The Falling Water Given #4-6* and your work for the Biennale, you explore the concept of “leakage.” What motivated this interest?

YM: It all started with the photo series “*Moré Moré Tokyo*” in which I took pictures of leaks in Tokyo subway stations. For a long time, I watched station staff improvise bricolage-style constructions with plastic sheets, buckets, plastic bottles, duct tape, and umbrellas to address groundwater and rainwater eating their way through the structures. Those site-specific contrivances, adapted to each situation, seemed ideal for me—sculptures or architectural structures made on an ad hoc basis, without any sense of authorial intention. They also expressed Japanese politics in a nutshell. Instead of fixing the root cause, they mend and patch, dancing around the issue, even though the result looks pretty ugly. Then, after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, “leaky” came to imply not only leaking water, but also

OPPOSITE:
I/O,
 2023.
 View of installation
 in the 14th
 Gwangju Biennale,
 South Korea, 2023.

THIS PAGE:
I/O,
 2021.
 Two details of installation
 at Atelier Nord, Oslo.

■ yuko mohri

“**Intention is kept to a minimum,** and the sculpture takes on a shape that I did not mean it to take.”



the radioactive substances that dribbled out of the collapsed buildings at the plant.

Water possesses tremendous energy. When leaks happen, and water starts to act freely in a manmade structure, it suddenly spins out of human control, becoming a violent, corrosive substance that must be stopped. These works are created by causing water leaks in the production/exhibition site and then composing a kinetic sculpture by dealing with those leaks in an improvisational manner, like the subway station employees. The work is complete when the water is safely contained and made to circulate via an electric pump, which makes the sculpture a kind of circuit. The basic concept is to respond to a crisis. Intention is kept to a minimum, and the sculpture takes on a shape that I did not mean it to take. That's what's interesting to me. The sculpture is the result of communication and negotiation with this material. The occurrence takes precedence over the result.

I should mention Duchamp here because he had a sense of energy in circulation and because his work is itself a figuration of cyclical energy. I quoted *The Large Glass* in the *Moré Moré [Leaky]: The Falling Water Given* works partly because they marked the first occasion that I was “given the waterfall” as a material, just like Duchamp in his last work, *Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas...* (1946–66).

EAK: What role do issues such as water usage and climate change play in your work?

YM: My practice is continuous with my daily life. Often, the observation of everyday events and found objects leads to a work. In those cases, I try to include what I see and think about from my perspective. I live, feel, and think in this time and age, and in that sense, social issues, to the extent that I am involved in them, are a natural part of my work. I'm just not sure if I am making any big statement. Rather than sending out a message, I feel like I am creating an antenna, and viewers receive something by projecting themselves into my work.

EAK: “Compose,” your exhibition for the Japan



OPPOSITE: LORENZO PALMER, COURTESY THE ARTIST; PROJECT FULFILL ART SPACE, MOTHER'S TANKSTATION, YUTAKA KIKUTAKE GALLERY, TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY / THIS PAGE: COURTESY THE ARTIST; PROJECT FULFILL ART SPACE, MOTHER'S TANKSTATION, YUTAKA KIKUTAKE GALLERY, TANYA BONAKDAR GALLERY

national pavilion, focuses on “the pandemic, Venice’s 2019 floods, and climate protests, positing the false dichotomy, ‘which is more valuable, art or life?’”

How did you select the theme?

YM: I’m interested in different modalities of energy, and in Venice, I am showing the circulation of energy through two water-themed works. Art and life are both crucial, and they must be connected somehow. It can’t be a simple dichotomy. But human beings are selfish, and we are too human-centered, in art and in life. Reducing the issue to (human-created) art and (human) life would be going further in the wrong direction. If we think of life as a circulation of energy, then all living things can be said to die and return to the earth. At first, this seems to suggest that an organism goes from a beginning to an end. But from a larger perspective, this cycle, too, makes a circuit or coil. This time-consuming, continuous circuit generates energy, but the process takes so long that it’s hard to see. In East Asia, where Sook-Kyung Lee, the

Korean curator in charge of the Japan pavilion, and I grew up, this is a mainstream concept.

When I conducted my research, I learned that plans were underway to create compost sites around the Giardini. My work establishes a kind of circuit between those composters and the pavilion. “Compose,” means “to place together.” This is also the original meaning of “composting.” In a world where quarantines and lockdowns were followed by division and resistance, I want to ask what it means for people to be “placed together,” living together again. That’s still too human-centric, though. So, not only human beings, but also insects and animals, even water and plastics, are placed together. I believe our living together with all of them, too often dismissed as mere “noise,” is what makes the world the happy place it should be. ■

Yuko Mohri’s exhibition at the Japan national pavilion is on view at the 60th Venice Biennale through November 24, 2024.

OPPOSITE:
Moré Moré (Leaky):
Variations,
 2022.
 Detail of work installed
 in “JAPAN. BODY_
 PERFORM_LIVE.”
 PAC Milan, 2022.

THIS PAGE:
Moré Moré (Leaky):
Variations,
 2022.
 View of installation
 in the 23rd Biennale of
 Sydney, 2022.