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## Artist Yuko Mohri on creating work with a focus on ecological consciousness

Reflecting on her installation at the Japan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale's 2024 edition, Mohri discusses her artistic process in a conversation with STIR

by Rosalyn DMello | Published on: Apr 20, 2024

As I delved deeper into Yuko Mohri's uncanny artistic practice, an image evolved in my head of the Japanese-origin artist huddled against the floor with her ears to the ground. I wanted to seize the opportunity for a brief interview with Mohri and, the more I researched, the more intricate my conjuring became of her solitary body inhabiting a site, attuning itself to every architectural facet. I mused about a potential parallel with experts who tune musical instruments. Except, most tuners use an external device to harmonise an instrument's tonal range and nuance. Mohri seems to task her body with being a receptacle of the spatial energies of a given site. Her process of tuning in is intuitive and long drawn. Based on the information she gathers from being in a place, she forages for the material components that will become part of a larger assembly. She seems to then release her found objects from the obligation of their assigned or ascribed functions by relating them to a congregation of other materials and objects, using technological methodologies to allow them to vocalise or articulate what is yet unsaid, which is perhaps elemental to their constitution. The ensuing state of transcendence assumes poetic intonations that are underscored by the installation's site-specific nature. The experience cannot be replicated, which enables the installation to be experienced in the same vein as an ephemeral performance wholly located in the 'now'-ness of its spectatorship.

Mohri graciously responded to my questions about her work-in-progress at the Japanese Pavilion of the 2024 edition of the Venice Biennale, offering a few clues about what we could expect to encounter while maintaining the mystery of her processual dilemmas.

**Rosalyn D'Mello: How do you 'begin' the process of attuning yourself towards a site? Do you spend time in the room where your work will be installed and simply listen to what its architecture is telling you? Is it a bodily process or do you use technological devices?**

**Yuko Mohri:** For me, beginning a work is both a cognitive and a physical process. It is, of course, crucial to learn about the exhibition site and the history of the surrounding area. During this process, your knowledge becomes active and more familiar, as you learn not only from books but by talking to experts and ordinary residents as well.

Also, once the venue is decided, I make sure to spend as much time as possible there, alone. At that point, I need to stay undisturbed, all by myself, feeling the space directly. That's how I identify the characteristics and elements of the space. This applies to white cubes in a museum as well. I spend time in the galleries until I see the placement of the works, determined by the conditions, including the texture of the floor and the air currents created by the air conditioning system. From the outside, this process might look like me simply spacing out alone in the room (lol), but my head is whirling the whole time.

In Japan, there is this custom when you bathe in a hot spring. You gradually get used to the heat by splashing warm water over your body, rather than directly plunging into the boiling spring. This way, after a while you find yourself relaxed and ready to enjoy the hot water warming your body from inside, without



Portrait of Yuko Mohri | Image: Kugeyasuhide; Courtesy of Yuko Mohri

putting too much strain on it. Similarly, as you deepen your understanding of the exhibition over time, both cognitively and physically, a revelation comes to you at some point.

**Rosalyn: What role does your studio play in the development of your installations?**

**Yuko:** You can say that my studio functions mostly as a storage. Collecting objects is key to my process, so I own three spaces to stock them. Once I've done about half of the piece in one corner of the studio, my work there is done. Then the process is going to be transferring the 'half-work' to the exhibition site and attuning it to its space.

For the upcoming Venice Biennale, I decided not to bring even a 'half-work' to the site, but to source all materials from local antique markets, supermarkets, and grocery stores, turning the Japan Pavilion, the venue of my show, into a studio. It makes more sense, both ecologically and economically, for artists to travel individually and complete their work on-site, don't you think?

**Rosalyn: What are some of the predicaments you have had to confront in the process of evolving your work for the Venice Biennale?**

**Yuko:** The Japan Pavilion in the Giardini was designed in 1956 by Takamasa Yoshizaka, a student of Le Corbusier. That's one very distinctive piece of architecture. The marble floor, adorned with a geometric pattern in two tones, black and grey, is beautiful in an old-fashioned way, but the pattern compromises the homogeneity of the space, and the material feels too imposing in this day and age. In addition, the square room has a square hole in the centre of both the ceiling and the floor, which exposes the space to the outside air at all times... I went to Venice at the end of January and set to work by turning the venue into a studio. However, it was really not a comfortable environment for human beings, because the electric heaters did not work at all due to the cold creeping up from the stone floor, and the hole in the ceiling constantly sucked the heat out. Since this is an unusual design for an exhibition room, with its top and bottom both exposed to the outside, I am now on fire figuring out how to turn this environment around and make the most of it.



Installation view of Decomposition, 2022, fruit, speaker, cable, wood, computer, dimension variable, Neue Fruchttige Tanzmusik, Yutaka Kikutake Gallery, Tokyo, 2022, Yuko Mohri  
Image: Kugeyasuhide; Courtesy of Yuko Mohri, Project Fulfill Art Space, mother's tankstation, Yutaka Kikutake Gallery, Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

**Rosalyn: Do you ever have certain preconceptions about what you want to do or is what you create entirely circumstantial?**

**Yuko:** I think it is more like the latter, as what I conceive in advance rarely plays out as planned. I never decide on how to position an installation just by looking at the floor plans. For me, a dialogue with the environment is very much like a negotiation, where I make a request and then verify whether that works, one by one. Also, I try to keep my own will and intention out of what I produce.

**Rosalyn: Do you have a certain moment within your process when your 'arrangement' or 'composition' within a space feels perfectly pitched in a certain way, or a moment when you feel there is a transcendence taking place?**

**Yuko:** I think I make art precisely to find that 'moment.' As I mentioned above, I believe it comes naturally out of the relationship between objects, and the relationship between objects and the exhibition space or the architecture, independent of my will or intention. It is a unique feeling, different, for example, from putting furniture in a comfortable arrangement in a living room. Just as [Constantin] Brancusi's studio, today recreated opposite the Centre Pompidou, was in and of itself a living work of art for him, I want my work to come into being through a dialogue with the objects and spaces with which I work.