

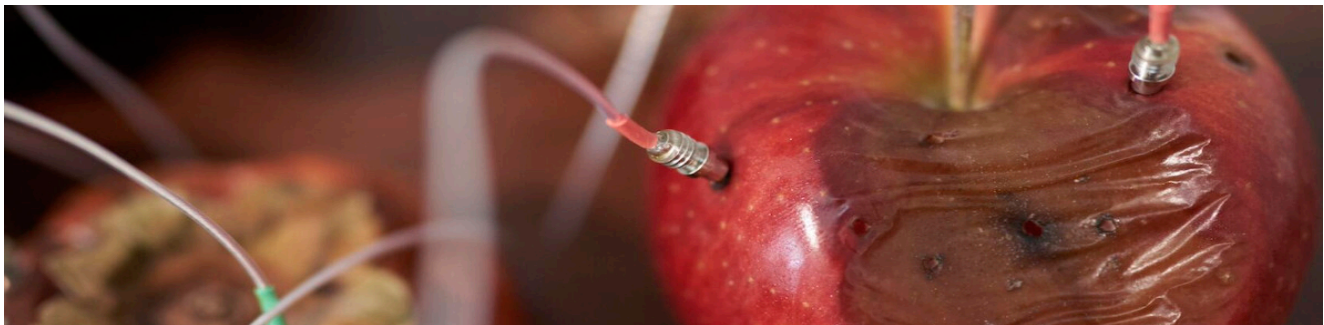
Trouillot, Terence, *Beyond Boundaries: Koo Jeong A and Yuko Mohri in Conversation*, frieze No.242, April 2024

# FRIEZE

## Beyond Boundaries: Koo Jeong A and Yuko Mohri in Conversation

We spoke with the artists representing Japan and South Korea about their Venice exhibitions and the obsolescence of national divisions

BY KOO JEONG A, YUKO MOHRI AND TERENCE TROUILLOT IN INTERVIEWS , OPINION | 27 MAR 24



**Terence Trouillot** I would love you both to share what you're working on for the Venice Biennale this year. I know you are both taking inspiration from the city itself: for the Japanese pavilion, Yuko, you're thinking about the impact of the climate crisis; Koo, for the Korean pavilion, you're addressing national boundaries and the slippage between nationhood and place. How did those ideas come about?

**Yuko Mohri** For the first time this year, a non-Japanese national – South Korean curator Sook-Kyung Lee – has been invited to oversee the Japanese pavilion. This is Sook-Kyung's second time in Venice: she curated the Korean pavilion in 2015, with a show of works by Moon Kyungwon and Jeon Joonho. So, in addition to the fact that the Japanese and Korean pavilions are adjacent in the Giardini, it was Sook-Kyung who provided Koo and I with a further level of connection, and suggested we should meet up with each other. And it seems as though our installations happen to have some similarities – albeit we are coming from entirely different perspectives.

**TT** Maybe that's a good place to start: thinking about the similarities in your practices. Yuko, your work often incorporates sound, while yours, Koo, is visually immersive. How do you believe the auditory and visual elements in your respective oeuvres interact with and influence each other?

**YM** I have always been interested in sound, especially acoustics – which is to say how sound relates to its environment and to all the elements that exist within that environment. I often use kinetic objects that produce sound to incorporate melody and noise. I am really interested in the relationship between movement, environment and sound. Whenever I start to build an installation, I carefully investigate the space, conditions and environment – not only inside the venue, but outside, too. I then connect this to my understanding of what I have learned from the local area – in this case, Venice. I'm already here in the city to start collecting material for the installation and to respond to the Japanese pavilion as a physical structure.

**Koo Jeong A** That's very exciting! For my part, since the early 1990s, I have been making immersive installations that transform spaces such as apartments, galleries or subway stations into environments that appeal to all the senses. I guess they could be deemed unconventional environments; I make them dynamic using whatever is needed, from wall paintings and sculptures, to animations and films. Sound is a medium I have continued to experiment with over the years. For example, my contribution to the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009, curated by Daniel Birnbaum, was a work called *Fantasissima & Fantasissimousss*, which comprised six sensors facing outwards to the

boats on the water. These sensors triggered a series of trembling trees that emitted sounds throughout the Giardini. For my 3D film OUSSS [2014–22], I collaborated with several composers and the musicians Juan Manuel Artero Fernández-Montesinos, Kinda Hassan, Koreless and Nicolas Becker from HAL audio.

Sound is an important part of these creations. By working with a composer, I can articulate my experiences in innovative ways that evoke new potentialities, whilst maintaining the distinctiveness of the location through a borrowed form or idea. Venice has always been a great inspiration to me. I have long been fascinated by the unique topography of this island; pieces of stone floating on the ocean. Yet, despite its precarity, the city has always been alive with creativity: from the 20th-century Venetian architect and designer Carlo Scarpa to John Ruskin's treatise *The Stones of Venice* [1851–53].

**TT** Yuko, you mentioned that you're currently in Venice collecting found and organic materials, which you often employ in your work. Koo, you also use unconventional media. For your Venice Biennale presentation, for instance, you'll be working with smell. Could you both talk about your relationship to materials in relation to your pavilion projects?

**YM** Almost all the materials for the artworks in my presentation will be sourced in Venice. Rather than transporting pieces created in my studio in Japan, it's more cost effective and environmentally friendly to produce the work here, by myself. It will also allow me to become more familiar with the area and Venetian culture. I've visited Venice a couple of times before, but this is my first time showing here; it's also my first time gathering materials here, and I still haven't decided what type I want to use. I generally collect everyday objects that are typical of the place in which I'm exhibiting the work, and that relate to people's lives. Venice, however, is unique, and it's not easy for me to understand Venetian life. But, through the objects I find here, I can begin to imagine what type of life the locals have. My first item, for instance, is a shopping trolley because – in a city without cars and with almost no bicycles – a trolley is fundamental to life. It's funny, when Venetians see me with my trolley, they ask: 'Do you live in Venice?' I guess it is still unusual to see Asians using the same equipment as locals. The other element I want to draw on is water, which I use all the time in my

installations. So, yesterday, with my friend David Horvitz, I visited the Querini Stampalia Foundation, which was largely designed by Scarpa. The foundation has a beautiful garden with a wonderful fountain. I really enjoyed the way water is used in the garden. Scarpa seemingly drew inspiration for it from Japanese gardens. Venice is a port city where the West and the East have historically intersected, so it was intriguing to witness the tangible connection between both cultural spheres manifested in the form of a garden.

**KJ** My project for this year's biennial, ODORAMA CITIES [2024], is a response to the segregation represented by the national pavilions in the Giardini. I would like to go beyond these boundaries to create a new vision for a united nationhood. Coincidentally, whilst I have been working on this project, there have been some interesting rumours circulating in the art world about a transnational pavilion at this year's biennial. The current artistic directors of the Korean pavilion, Jacob Fabricius and Lee Seolhui, were keen for the commissioned artist to explore storytelling from a broad perspective. As a result, from June to September 2023, through an open call, we collected testimonials from people in South Korea and around the world, to describe their memories of how their cities smell. From the 600 stories we gathered, I produced scents inspired by their recollections.

The use of scent in ODORAMA CITIES speaks to this cross-cultural element. At the Korean Pavilion, scent diffusers will be embedded within seating areas which, combined with the daylight streaming in through the glass windows, will create a sense of comfort in the otherwise empty space. Visitors will also experience scents I have created to convey the smell of different cities across the globe through several 'scratch and sniff' interfaces. I hope my contribution will conjure new ways of finding meaning. I am interested in how art can impact and enhance our lived experience of the world, leading us towards a more ecstatic vision of reality. It is about imagining our own version of the world within the fabric of the very one that we are living in.

**TT** Can you speak to this idea of collaboration and collectivity within your projects? Not only in the obvious sense of working with other people, but also in terms of engaging with the audience through interactive installations.



Yuko Mohri, I/O, 2021, installation view, 14th Gwangju Biennale, 2023. Courtesy: the artist, Gwangju Biennale Foundation, Project Fulfill Art Space, mother's tankstation, Yutaka Kikutake Gallery and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery; photograph: glimworkers

**YM** I enjoy collaborating in different ways. Sometimes, I might be working with a musician like the late Ryuichi Sakamoto or a performance artist like Akio Suzuki. Other times, I could be collaborating with local art handlers, like the two Venetians who are currently assisting me with the install at the Japanese pavilion. The idle chats I have with them teach me so much about the city. I believe that those types of conversations are a wonderful form of collaboration, too.

**KJ** I tend to find collective creation more rewarding than solo practice. It's enriching to divide up roles within a project and to see how each individual brings a context that activates other meanings in the work; a collective intelligence is formed and then compressed. In addition to the collaborative projects with composers and musicians that I already mentioned, another significant collective work was SPY TREE [2007], made for 'Il Tempo del Postino', the group show 'occupying time rather than space', curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Philippe Parreno. The piece involved two performers shaking a tree. I also recently collaborated with the fashion designer Jaime Morales Cortes to produce a jacket. This will be launched later this year, along with my latest skatepark at Berlin's Neue Nationalgalerie. Another notable collaboration was the book I produced – along with an accompanying sculpture titled Cedric [2003], now in the collection of Tate Modern in London – dedicated to the British architect Cedric Price in honour of his unrealized Fun Palace project [1961].

**TT** And what about audience participation? How do you conceive of audiences interacting with the work?

**KJ** The role of the audience is crucial to my practice. My work has always responded to and rewarded the audience's efforts, but it is also about how the work permeates beyond direct experience. Like an ocean, it continues to ebb and flow even after you have gone home, filtering through into everyday life, beyond art. My skateparks reflect this idea in a physical way, whilst Prerequisites 7 [2019], the augmented- reality work of a floating ice cube in the air, which I produced with Acute Art, speaks to this in a virtual sense.

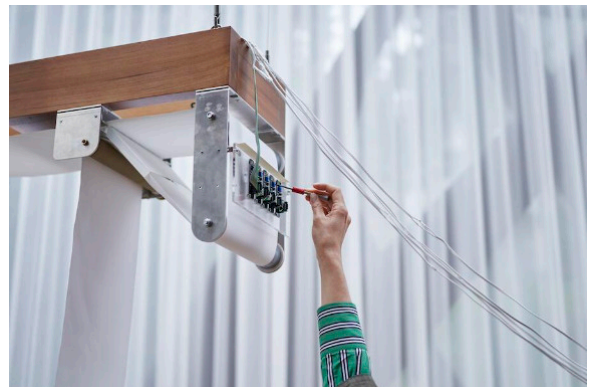
**YM** While there isn't any direct interaction between my work and the audience, I really focus on their experience of the installation; I want to make it special for them. And, because I work in installation, the audience needs to be physically present: they can't really experience it through documentary images, or via a screen, or on social media. This may seem obvious but, in recent times, and particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have become increasingly conditioned to view and experience art through our phones, mediated through social media. I love Instagram, but the installation – or most elements of it, at least – you just can't deliver via a platform like that.

**TT** I wonder if you could speak a little bit about the cultural perspectives and themes that run across your work, which are distinct and specific to both of you?

**YM** When we talk in terms of national pavilions, we become stuck in these notions of distinct identities and cultural divisions. But, to be honest, I don't think that much about Japan, personally. I am more interested in East Asia: that's why I asked Sook-Kyung to collaborate with me on my biennial project. I first met Sook-Kyung at last year's Gwangju Biennale, which she curated, and in which I participated. The title of the biennial was 'soft and weak, like water', a quote from the 6th-century Taoist philosopher Lao Tze. It made me think of all these confluences between East Asian cultures, and how difficult it is to divide ourselves along national lines – China, Korea, Japan – much like how water is this unstable thing, almost impossible to contain.

That's why I'm so obsessed with water – not only in relation to Venice, but as metaphor for how national identities are empirically fluid.

**KJ** Like Yuko, I want to go beyond these boundaries, to create the bones, if you will, of a new vision for a universal nation that is not driven by borders. I would like my pavilion to create a sense of community and to promote symbiotic relations that will help us build towards a united future.



Yuko Mohri, I/O, 2021, installation view, 14th Gwangju Biennale, 2023. Courtesy: the artist, Project Fulfill Art Space, mother's tankstation, Yutaka Kikutake Gallery and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery; photograph: kugeyasuhide