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SOUND OF LIFE

NOT A DUCHAMPIAN: IN CONVERSATION WITH INSTALLATION ARTIST YUKO MOHRI



In 2015, Yuko Mohri was awarded the Grand Prix Nissan Art Award for *Moré Moré (Leaky): The Waterfall Given*.

Since then, her series of kinetic sculptures have become a familiar sight. “Leaky”, which has seen various iterations since 2014 – features elements like umbrellas, hoses, and rubber gloves – assembled together in a constellation recalling Marcel Duchamp’s use of the readymade.

Mohri was fascinated by a scene in a Tokyo subway station where random objects were strewn together as an ad-hoc solution to a water leak.

Another work from the series was recently shown at the PAC in Milan, Italy as part of a major group show “Japan, Body Perform Live” showcasing a selection of Japanese contemporary art.

The same year that she won the Nissan Art Award, Mohri received an artist residency grant from the Asian Cultural Council and spent six months in New York. Her residencies have multiplied exponentially, as have her solo and group shows and art fair appearances – most recently, with Yutaka Kikutake Gallery at Art Basel Hong Kong.

In April, Mohri is scheduled to take over the Horanggasy Art Polygon building during the 14th Gwangju Biennale in South Korea. We caught up with the artist on the occasion of the much-awaited biennale.

From discussing John Cage to Susan Philipsz, the debate of whether to categorise works as sound art versus experimental music is longstanding and relentless. Do you have an opinion to share on this genre dispute as an artist who frequently works with sound?

I believe that the delimitation of genres is something that transforms over the course of history.

The creation of a new genre may cause already existing works to be interpreted from a new and unprecedented perspective. Or, conversely, a new genre may be born from a new interpretation of works.

I think such discussions are very interesting and creative.

On the other hand, I am not really interested in debating whether works by John Cage or Susan Philipsz are sound art or experimental music.

I am the type of person who would just say, "Well, they are both sound art and experimental music," and be done with it.

I once had lamb BBQ with Susan in Sapporo, and I thought she was also the type of person who, like me, would say it doesn't matter either way (laughs).



Moré Moré (Leaky): Variations, 2017, "Grey Skies." Photo: Fujisawa City Art Space



You Locked Me Up in a Grave, You Owe Me at Least the Peace of a Grave, 2018, "Assume That There Is Friction and Resistance." Photo: Kuniya Oyamada

Your works have been directly inspired by Marcel Duchamp's readymades on more than one occasion. How, and when, did this strong connection to the artist come to be?

Japan is a strange country. The research and introduction about Dada and Surrealism have been going on since the same period when they were born.

It seems that the Japanese poets or critics kept in touch with Surrealists and ordered magazines, books, catalogues, and more as much as possible. Among them, the poet and critic Shuzo Takiguchi was a key person – especially in regard to Duchamp.

After World War II, Takiguchi had a chance encounter with Duchamp himself at Dali's house, and the two became friends. It is a well-known anecdote that when painter Shusaku Arakawa left for the US at the end of 1961, Takiguchi gave him a note with Duchamp's contact, and Arakawa actually called Duchamp from the airport.

It is said that Duchamp provided the young Japanese artist with various support. Also, when *Large Glass* was re-created in Tokyo in 1980 with the permission of Teeny, Duchamp's widow, Takiguchi was one of the people who supervised the re-creation.

My first work references the French musician Erik Satie's "Vexations", and the musician Kuniharu Akiyama, who introduced Satie to Japan, was a member of an avant-garde art collective called "Jikken Kobo (Experimental Workshop)", which was formed immediately after the World War II (incidentally, Takiguchi was also involved in the formation of this collective).

By the way: his wife, Aki Takahashi, is an excellent pianist who plays Satie and John Cage. Aki's brother, the composer and pianist Yuji Takahashi is also a huge artist who not only introduced Satie but has been a driving force in Japanese music itself.

Also, almost all of them listed above have some connection to the Fluxus movement.

I was at the extreme end of this genealogy (I think there are few artists younger than me who have access to this cultural source), so I had a certain amount of information about Duchamp as a basic education, albeit via Surrealism.

The above is a long explanation of the situation as a premise, as I have been told that I suddenly approached Duchamp.

However, my definitive encounter with Duchamp was in Philadelphia.

In 2015, during my residency at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) in New York, I took an express bus to Philadelphia, where the *Large Glass* and *Étant Donnés* are located. I was filled with anticipation on the way to Philadelphia, and I didn't even feel like drinking like I usually do (laughs), so I intended to face the work with a sacred feeling.

Then in the museum, after passing through a small room where works by his two older brothers were hung, I entered the Duchamp room and there was the *Large Glass*. I had imagined it to be a solid object from the pictures I had seen in art books, but the actual piece was made of a material similar to the timeworn aluminium sash used for window frames in old houses.

I was shocked by the gap between the Tokyo version of the *Large Glass* replica, and the solid stainless steel one. And the *Étant donnés* in the back room, "falling water" was chirping and flowing with cheap electric decorations.

They were made of industrial products that are familiar to us, just like his Fountain, which was refused to be exhibited because it was just a mass-produced industrial product.

Despite the sacred feeling I had when I visited the exhibition, the works themselves gave me a very casual impression, and I felt as if I was able to grasp Duchamp's work in an instant.

Needless to say, Duchamp is a conceptual artist, but in my case, paradoxically, I encountered lively Duchamp through the "aura" of the industrial products used in his works. In other words, I am not a so-called Duchampian.

Your "Leaky" series was inspired by "human artistic impulse" that you first came across at a Tokyo station in 2009. Have you unexpectedly encountered this sort of impulse anywhere else since then?

First of all, calling it "human artistic impulse" may be a bit too artistically inclined. These objects I photographed in the Tokyo subway were simply first aid measures taken by the station staff in response to a water leakage emergency, and it is too open and unassuming, with no intention of hiding their shameful parts.

But I believe that this type of bricolage work in which one uses the objects at hand to solve an unpredictable emergency situation, such as a water leak, is creativity that can be demonstrated by any human being, not just an artist.

I feel knowledge, aesthetic and "human creative impulse" in the act of correcting, repairing, and fixing, rather than making or creating.

The most recent global emergency is the pandemic. My methodology has always been to visit the location where the exhibition is to be held, and begin research and produce the work based on the inspiration I gained there, but because of the pandemic, I am no longer able to go anywhere at will, as I have done in the past.

It became important to find new production methods and new ways to develop my work. One of the aspects of my work, I think, is to show fluid changes in phenomena and situations, including materials and time.



Moré Moré (Leaky): Flows, 2018, "Same As It Ever Was." Courtesy of the artist and Project Fulfill Art Space, Taipei

For me, focusing on the unsteadiness and the process is a way to feel reality – so I felt that my motivation was actually fueled by the situation in which I was unable to see the future. It was truly the “human creative impulse”!

As a result, new series such as *Piano Solo*, *I Can't Hear You* and *Decomposition*, which can be installed remotely, were born, and I participated in more exhibitions over three years than at any other time in my life.

In *Decomposition*, you placed electrodes on fruits, and In *I Can't Hear You*, you developed a sound corridor. In terms of manipulating sound, is there a method that you find to be especially exciting?

Sound is a very important element of my work. However, I would like to treat sound as a material in a different way from making music.

In *Decomposition*, electrodes are inserted into various fruits to produce a synthesiser sound through a speaker, and the sound changes as the resistance value changes.

When I was in my 20s, I once measured the resistance values of vegetables and fruits as an experiment. The water content is fluctuating and the resistance values never settle down. I was impressed by the fact that the water content inside the fruit was moving at a dizzying pace even though it did not appear to be moving.

Remembering this experience, I thought that if I could convert the resistance value of the fruit into sound, I could create a work in which the sound is constantly changing.

The title means “break down” or “decay”, but it also includes the word “composition”, which can be interpreted as the negation of making music, since it has the prefix “de-” indicating negation.

In fact, the piece is not a composition, but the pitch changes according to the amount of water contained inside the fruit, so the “decomposition” would be perfect, I thought.

This title is also a statement that “I do not compose”. The fruit designs the sound on its own – this may seem like a lazy attitude for a composer, but laziness is part of the concept.

Pierre Boulez once criticised John Cage's work as “chance by inadvertence”. But I see inadvertence as a positive thing.

The statement “I do not compose” can be paraphrased as the author not choosing sounds, or, in line with Cage's intention, letting sounds be what they are. One of the roots of my work, including *Decomposition*, is live electronic music, like Cage's music or David Tudor's *Rainforest*. I like to leave the sounds alone and let them play freely.

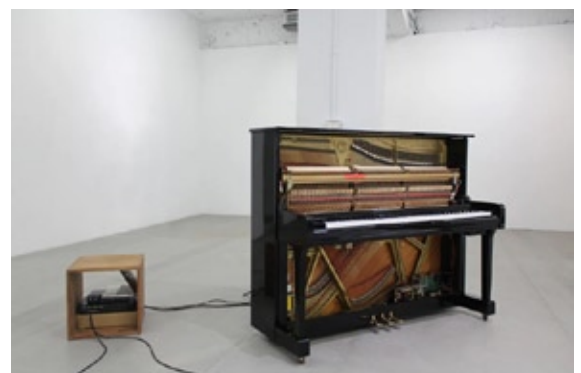
You've frequently participated in artist residencies. Have these travels significantly shaped your work?

Moving, rather than travelling, is a source of inspiration for me. Whenever I am stuck with ideas, I find that the best cure is to change my location. The language, food, and other customs of different regions, daily necessities, infrastructure, cityscapes, and many other elements inspire me.

I have had many wonderful experiences, such as having ants eat the cables in Kochi, South India, or wandering the



Moré Moré (Leaky): *Flows*, 2018, “Same As It Ever Was.” Courtesy of the artist and Project Fulfill Art Space, Taipei



Piano Solo, 2020, “SOLO.” Courtesy of the artist and Project Fulfill Art Space, Taipei.

streets without an iPhone in Havana, where there is no internet access. The accumulation of these experiences has definitely influenced my installation.

I was almost addicted to travelling until right after the pandemic. I was disinfecting aeroplane seats like Naomi Campbell, leaving Sao Paulo right before the Carnival season, to Milan during Fashion Week, to London, and back again.

Having experienced pandemic outbreaks everywhere I went, I was indeed frightened and returned to Japan.

However, I did not return to my home in Tokyo but instead moved to a villa on the shore of a large lake, where I did “keep distance” and worked on the concept of a new work. Perhaps it is my nature not to want to stay in one place.

What can we expect from your work on view at the 14th Gwangju Biennale and your upcoming show at Mother's Tankstation?

In Gwangju, I will use the entire Horanggasy Art Polygon building for my installation, which is poetically inspired by the novel *The White Book* by Han Kang, an outstanding novelist from Gwangju.

At Mother's Tankstation, I am planning a new development of *Decomposition* mentioned above.



Decomposition, 2021, "SOLO." Courtesy of the artist and Project Fulfill Art Space, Taipei

Cover Credit: Yuko Mohri, *Decomposition*, 2021, "SOLO." Courtesy of the artist and Project Fulfill Art Space, Taipei

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