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The State of Post-Covid Sound/Art According to Yuko Mohri Part 2: Her Eyes on East Asia and How She Faces the "Site"

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ART #OBSERVE

We conducted an interview with artist Yuko Mohri to reveal her artistic practice. In the second part, we asked her about keywords in her activities, her admiration for music, her punk spirit, a performer side of her, and her future prospects.

Artist Yuko Mohri has held her first solo exhibitions in Tokyo in about two years: *Moré Moré Tokyo* at Akio Nagasawa Gallery and *Neue Fruchtige Tanzmusik* at Yutaka Kikutake Gallery. Mohri has created many installations associated with sound or music, and at the *Neue Fruchtige Tanzmusik*, which featured the latest work from her "Decomposition" series, in which electrodes are inserted into various types of fruit to create ever-changing sounds, she released her first record work, *Neue Fruchtige Tanzmusik(vinyl)*. We conducted an interview with Mohri to find out more about her artistic practice with a focus on sound/music. In the first part, she talked about her recent situation after the pandemic, her own interpretation about "Decomposition," her focus on "movement" that is not bound by the audible range, and how she perceives politics in art. In the second part, we asked her about the three keywords of her practice: "error," "improvisation," and "feedback", as well as her admiration for music, her punk spirit, a performer side of her, and her future prospects.

In a larger sense, sound is part of sculpture

–I am sure that you have had many occasions to explain your practices to people you meet for the first time as you participate in many exhibitions abroad. You used to refer to yourself as a "sound artist," but what term do you use now to describe your activities?

Yuko Mohri (Mohri): I try to explain myself as a "sculptor" outside of Japan for the time being. Sculpture refers not only to those made of wood or stone, but also to various type of works as can be seen from the term "kinetic sculpture," and in a larger sense, I think we can consider sound to be a part of sculpture. Therefore, I explain that I create my works by dealing comprehensively with sound, readymade, and kinetic elements. On the other hand, if I use the terms "sound art" or "sound artist," I would possibly be misunderstood as an artist who uses only sound as material.

–Do you feel there is a difference in reaction when you explain your activities between Japan and other countries?

Mohri: It seems that the word "sculpture" more naturally implies multiple materials overseas. For example, "sound sculpture" is often considered a type of sound art in Japan, but overseas, it overlaps with and is connected to sculptures made of various materials. The number of artists who do not specialize in a particular material, but use sound, video, and clay to create kinetic works of art, has increased tremendously in the past 10 years or so, and I feel that the terrain described by the word "sculpture" is broader than that of "sculpture" in Japan.

–I see. It is true that you use various materials other than sound in your works, but I think it is also very important that your works are related to sound and music in some way.

Mohri: If I were to explain my work in depth, I would certainly say that I am very much inspired by the sound/music element. However, I think it would be better not to have people focus only on that in the first explanation. Maybe that's because I used to have a hard time with the way I was defined by the term "media art" in the past. When I was a student, the term "media art" was overused. It seems that cutting-edge theme at the time was to "use the media (e.g., computers) to question the media itself (the object nature of computers)" —do you see what I mean?—but, since not everyone was able to make perfect use of this concept, the term was so broadly defined that any kind of expression using computers could be included in the field of media art. Of course, my works were not very matured, but I intended to be creating them within a larger context..., so I had discussions with my seminar professor, Ms. Seiko Mikami. Perhaps I suffered from the trauma of being forced into a genre in terms of the medium rather than the content.

Error, Improvisation, and Feedback

–In the past, you have mentioned "error," "improvisation," and "feedback" as three keywords for your artistic practice. All of these elements are associated with "movement," but have your perceptions of these keywords changed after the pandemic?

Mohri: I feel that I now perceive them a little more broadly. For a while after the pandemic, I was living a kind of primitive life in a cabin on the shore of the northern part of Lake Biwa, where I built a bonfire every day. Then, I had the thought that it would be a bit of a preposterous to continue creating artworks just for the sake of exhibitions, and that if I found a place that moved me when I walked around the lake, maybe I could create artworks there. It would be nice if someone visits the place 10 years from now and discovers, "Oh, I didn't know such a work existed there." Even if I create a temporary work with the keywords "error," "improvisation," and "feedback," I would like to think that the viewer can watch it more freely at any time.

–Eric Dolphy once said, "when you hear music, after it's over, it's gone in the air, you can never capture it again." And "movement" is also something that will transform and disappear unless experienced on the spot. In order to be discovered 10 years from now, the work will need to be fixed in some way. Which do you feel more strongly about, letting the work change as it does, or stopping the change and leaving it as a kind of universal object?

Mohri: There are works that I wouldn't mind if they are broken down and gone, and there are others that I would like to save. Perhaps the decision to create a record work this time and the decision to exhibit *Moré Moré Tokyo* with photographs were also based on this idea of "wanting to save my works." However, records are not actually permanent and universal, and the sound gradually changes as the vinyl gradually attired. That is partly why I thought it would be interesting as a means of preserving them. Either way, I feel that my desire to preserve my work has become stronger recently. In the past, I used to think that it was okay if a piece broke after it moved properly on the spot, or that it was done when the battery ran out, but now I want to think about the responsibility of a piece of art within a longer time frame. Even records still have a short history, and even if they remain for 100 years, I have no idea whether they will remain unbroken in 1,000 years. When I was recently in Korea on a study tour for the Gwangju Biennale to be held next year, I saw earthenware vessels from the first half of the 8th century (the Nara period in Japan) at a museum. It looked as if it had been buried only yesterday, and I was impressed by how beautiful it was. It is interesting to see how something once forgotten suddenly reappear after long periods of time. Maybe I should make a record out of stone or ceramic, too (laughs).



Moré Moré Tokyo #49 2021-2022
Courtesy of the artist, Project Fulfill Art Space,
Taipei, Mother's Tankstation Ltd., Dublin/London
and Akio Nagasawa Gallery, Tokyo

Mohri's Idea of "Improvisation" or Longing for Music

—I would like to ask you a little more about “improvisation,” one of the keywords you mentioned earlier. After the pandemic, more emphasis tends to be placed on planning, advance preparation, and management. Under such circumstances, how do you now view the improvisational element in the creation of your works?

Mohri: This may not answer your question, but when I thought about improvisation again recently, I realized that I should confront what I felt on the spot frankly, rather than just letting my momentum guide my expression.

When I went to Gwangju, I decided to see the dreadful history that Japan had made during the occupation with my own eyes, so I asked for arranging a dialogue with a university professor over there. Instead of using a normal pavilion as an exhibition venue for my show, we decided to use a building that had remained from the time of the Japanese occupation, which was a very challenging development for me. As I toured the venue, I was reminded that the history of Japan's invasion of the Korean Peninsula and other Asian countries and what I see when I create something here and now can be overlapped, and that I want to be sincere in interpreting them and creating artwork from this history in my own way. The city of Gwangju has another tragic past, not only the Japanese occupation, but also the rise of the democratic movement and its suppression. I wanted to create a crude piece of work out of an honest feeling I had in that place in a way that this multilayered history is present compatibly with the fact that I was moved by the sounds and lights when I visited the venue.

—For example, Christian Marclay said that the most important thing in improvisation is “collaboration with others,” and from what you just said, I was wondering if “facing the site” is the key for you.

Mohri: I place emphasis on the site, or rather, the site-specificity of the work. The other important thing for me is the objects. Markley is not only a visual artist but a musician, so he sees improvisation as an extension of musical performance, so he probably thinks about the relationship between people. Of course, that is also a major element of the relationship created in improvisation, but I take different view about it from that of Markley. I think it is interesting to see improvisation in the context of the instruments, the venue, the atmosphere, and the situations before and after. For example, whether you go to a concert after eating or on an empty stomach may affect the way you hear music, and your approach to your work will change in an improvisational manner depending on whether you are in a small venue or a large one. To put it in an extreme way, I think of improvisation as an act of going to a site empty-handed and doing something (laughs).

—How did you develop this interest in the idea of site-specificity?

Mohri: My interest in the site-specific nature of art, or the act of expressing something rapidly on site instead of exhibiting works that have been prepared in advance, may come from my admiration for the pace of music. Compared to visual art, music is very fast, and I feel that it is a form of expression that allows you to quickly solidify fresh material and incorporate what you are feeling at the time. I would like to express myself in this way in the art world as well, even if it is only in rough form, just like releasing demos in the form of records.

The Off Site and “Punk Spirit” of Fluxus

—In the sense that music is not only about the content of the performance but also about the space in which it is performed, the “weak sound improvisation” at Yoyogi Off-Site (2000-2005) and Sachiko M.'s exhibition “I'm here” were also expressions of sound that were truly based on the specificity of the space. Did your encounters with such attempts have an influence on your activities?

Mohri: Yes, they had a big influence on me. The Off Site looked very fresh even in the context of art. Nowadays, we kind of feel that contemporary art has taken root in Japan, but that is a very recent phenomenon. I even felt that a little rustic image was attached to it. I would say that Takashi Murakami was the only one who seemed to be keeping the heat on, but I personally didn't feel that was my cup of tea. I found it more interesting to go to live houses than to museums because I found the unfamiliar things going on in the music scene more stimulating as an art form. It was during this period that Atsuhiko Ito and Yukari Fujimoto established

“Off Site” in Yoyogi. Also, Shinro Ohtake was very important to me at that time, and I still have a vivid memory of seeing his “Dub-Hei & New Chanel,” an automatic/remote-controlled band, at the Setagaya Art Museum in 1999. I also felt sympathy for the way Ohtake was involved with music, as he had a band called JUKE/19. around 1980 and released a live album with Kazuhisa Uchihashi.

I felt a sense of familiarity, as well as a sense of “maybe I could do this, too” with various attempts done in Off Site (laughs). Though I had never shown my work at Off Site, I remember that I had a chance to play with I.S.O. (an improvisational unit made up of Yoshimitsu Ichiraku, Sachiko M and Yoshihide Otomo) at GRID605, a studio and event space that Otomo had opened. The most important thing is the fact that you can show your expression casually. For me, it didn't make sense to rent an old-fashioned rental gallery in Ginza to present my work because I couldn't afford to rent it in the first place and the form of expression born in such a place would be lame (laughs). I think the pace of the music scene suited my nature better than that.

—Setting aside the question of whether you can actually do it or not, in the sense that it makes you think, “Maybe I can do it,” I feel it's similar to punk.

Mohri: Yeah, you are right. Also, Fluxus was completely in line with that too. They didn't take art as something to be respected forever, but rather saw everyday life as an expression as well. In the history of art, it is rare to find a movement that has produced as many artists as Fluxus, and it is very important that Fluxus created a place for minorities such as Asians and women to be active in the American art world, which used to be a white male-dominated world. I still love the spirit of challenge, the punk spirit, and the spirit of experimentation.

—In a conversation with Yoshihide Otomo included in a book “Between Music and Art,” a collection of, you mentioned that the “Ensembles 2010-Resonance” exhibition at Art Tower Mito “could become a big movement like Fluxus.”

Mouri: Did I say such a cheeky thing? (laugh) But it is true that I was more enthusiastic about doing sound art before the 3.11 disaster. I feel that all of my motivation was totally spoiled by the earthquake. So I recognized that it was not that easy. Now, I just want to continue my own production and hope that 100 years from now, people will see there was some kind of movement.

Mohri as a Performer

—Speaking of punk, Mohri-san was a vocalist in a hardcore band called “Sisforsound” when you were in college.

Mohri: Haha (laughs). I recently digitized all the recordings I had made on DAT. I've been in touch with the members in the hope of releasing them someday.

—Oh, is that right? You performed vocals that sounded like a wordless scream in “Sisforsound,” but why did you decide to work as a visual artist rather than a musician?

Mohri: Simply because those vocals are something that I could only do with alcohol (laughs). Well, seriously, everyone has the desire to express something. Especially when I was young, I had a tremendous amount of energy, but I couldn't express it in words. So I expressed it under the influence of liquor. That's all there was to it. So when I look back on it in a calm way, I feel embarrassed, or I think it's hard to get drunk every time (laughs). With art, I can adjust those desires, so I thought that was more suited to my vibes.

—Do your musical activities during the Sisforsound period have any connection to your current artistic practices? Or is there a disconnect there?

Mohri: I think they are connected. The underlying motivation for my activities was and still is a desire of doing something that no one else has done, but at first I was still like a baby, and since I didn't have the language or methods, I just got drunk and expressed my energy as it was. Gradually, however, I learned various methods, and I think I became able to control my desires and energy to a certain extent and incorporate them into my work.

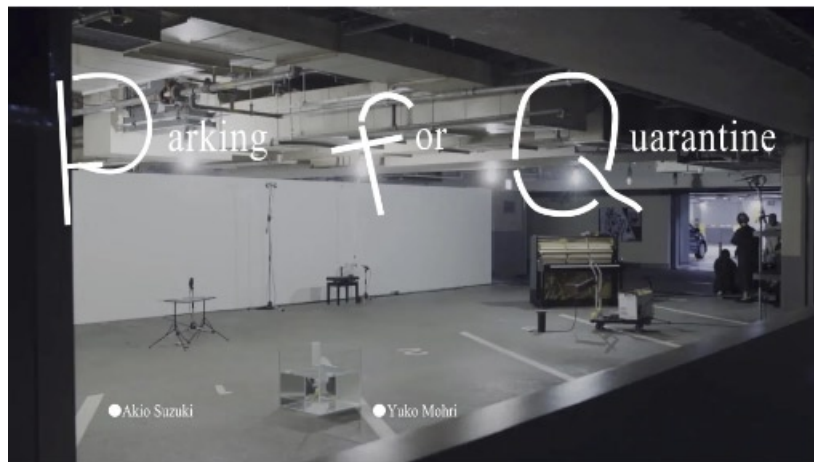
— Tetsuya Umeda and Kanta Horio, for example, are actively involved not only in exhibitions but also in performances, if not being involved in bands. Why don't you perform much?

Mohri: When I perform, I have to be out in front and I'm not very good at that (laughs). Even in an exhibition venue, I feel uncomfortable when I am there. I have a loud voice, so it clashes with the sound my work makes (laughs).

So I thought it would be better to avoid going out in public as much as possible, but two years ago, when I held the "SP. by yuko mohri" exhibition at Sony Park in Ginza, I decided to try something new just because of the pandemic, and I did a performance with Akio Suzuki. However, I was too nervous to do something like a performance while sober, so I followed Akio as he performed to record the sound of his performance with a gun microphone. Specifically, the gun mic picked up and analyzed the pitch of Akio's sound, and at about the same time, the automatic piano played the same sound as Akio's sound live. I had it filmed by my friend's video production company, Hoedown, and compiled it into a video piece called "Parking for Quarantine." It has only been screened a little in the local area, but I am quite satisfied with the result. Last May, I also did a performance of the same mechanism with Rie Nakajima at a music festival in Amsterdam.

—So you haven't decided not to do performances, but are you likely to do them in the future if the opportunity arises?

Mohri: Yes, I am. I am trying to work on various forms of expression in my own way. Even with Decomposition, which uses fruit, I want to show how the expression changes dynamically in a short period of time, so I am currently experimenting with the possibility of creating a performance piece.



Parking for Quarantine 2021, Courtesy of the artist



Decomposition "Neue Fruchttige Tanzmusik" Exhibition View, 2022, Courtesy of the artist, Yutaka Kikutake Gallery, Tokyo, Project Fulfill Art Space, Taipei and Mother's Tankstation Ltd., Dublin/London

“I want to think more about East Asia.”

–Lastly, could you tell us about your goals and prospects for the future?

Mohri: I would like to learn more about and think about East Asia. I am currently being approached by an American curator living in Taipei about a sound art exhibition using a park as a field. It seems that he is talking to Takahiro Kawaguchi, Jun Yang, and other sound artists from Japan, China, Taiwan, and the United States. There is a stone lanterns in a national park in Taipei with speakers installed, and they want to do an exhibition using them. During the Japanese occupation, radio programs were played from the speakers to “educate” the people of Taiwan about the Japanese language and culture, and each of the artists from the four countries will present sound works about the colonial and post-colonial periods from their respective countries’ historical standpoints.

I am now considering what kind of work to create, but as I mentioned earlier, I would like to avoid composing the music for the sound work. I was thinking about how to weave sounds about Taiwan during the colonial period from the perspective of the occupying country, and I thought that the archives of the Tokyo University of the Arts might be of use. At the time, Tokyo Academy of Music was the only school in Japan, the only imperialist country in East Asia – and therefore in East Asia – where one could “learn authentic Western modern music from Westerners.” Not only Japanese students, but also many aspiring musicians from East Asian countries under Japanese rule came to study there. The history of the intermingling and subversion of various gazes, including those of East Asian countries as well as Western imperialism, still lies dormant in this educational institution.

What Japan has done to East Asian countries is a history that will never disappear. Since I plan to participate in this exhibition in Taipei and also in the Gwangju Biennale next year, I would like to take this opportunity to do more research. As a Japanese, I think it is very important to reflect on how we think about East Asia.

–In turning your attention to East Asia, do you also want to break through the Western-centered art world?

Mohri: Well, it is not that easy to break down it. But at least you can make a statement. After all, people are incredibly ignorant about East Asia. When I do exhibition in the U.S. or Europe, I have to explain literally everything, which sometimes leaves me dumbfounded. I have to explain every possible thing to them, even though I know it’s not the most sophisticated approach. For example, the essay “Akiba,” which was published in Iwanami Shoten’s “Tosho” in 2021, was a process of repositioning the origins of my expression, which began with building electronic devices using junks I scavenged in Akihabara, in the geopolitics of postwar East Asia.

What I want to think about “East Asia” is a different perspective from the framework of binary opposition between “the West and the East.” If we look back in history, Japan is obviously a derivative of continental culture, and it is only recently that it has been divided. Of course, this does not mean that all of East Asia is the same culture, but rather, I would like to consider the differences that exist among them. I was reminded of this very recently when I read the interview between Toru Takemitsu and Yun Isang, the composer who wrote the symphonic poem *Exemplum in Memoriam Gwangju*. I hope that one day I, too, can be seen as an East Asian artist.