

Gleason, Alan, *The Art of Flux: Yuko Mohri at Ginza Sony Park*, artscape Japan, 1 September 2020

artscape Japan

Here and There:

The Art of Flux: Yuko Mohri at Ginza Sony Park

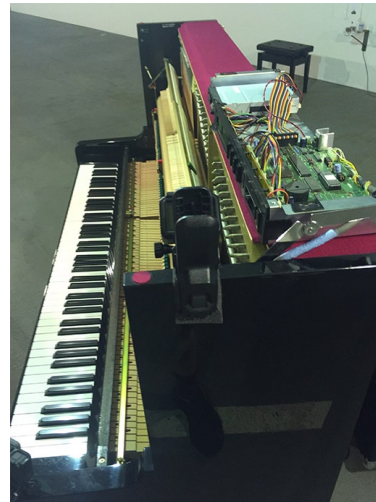
Alan Gleason

Disembarking at the Ginza subway station in downtown Tokyo, I walked out the wickets and across the underground passage straight into a cavernous space that appeared to be an extension of the parking garage next door. Instead of cars, though, people dressed in black were scurrying around a roomful of unusual sound equipment. Dominating the scene was a trio of rotating speaker horns the size of megaphones. Near the back wall a record turntable was set up, from which a maze of wires led to the speakers and numerous microphones. The floor and walls of the area facing this "stage" were covered with large texts in English and Japanese explaining the installation, which was created by artist Yuko Mohri.



Installation view of SP, Ginza Sony Park B2, 16 August 2020, with one of Yuko Mohri's rotating speakers in the foreground. The drumlike object in the clear case to the right is a woofer. Photo by Alan Gleason

The venue, Ginza Sony Park, occupies four basement levels beneath a park where the iconic Sony Building stood until it was torn down in 2017. Sony has plans to build a new cultural complex on the site, both above and below ground, but through September 2021 it is making the underground space available for a variety of creative programs. Sony invited Mohri to use two basement floors for a project of her own design. Installing a number of her audiovisual works, she invited several sound artists active in Japan's noise/improv milieu to interact with them. According to Mohri, the installation's title, *SP*, can stand for a number of things, among them "Sound in Progress," "Stay Park" (per "stay home"), speakers, and the Stumble Piano, a MIDI-activated upright acoustic piano that responds to ambient sounds, like a 21st-century version of the old player pianos.



The Stumble Piano, a MIDI-based player piano developed by Yuko Mohri. Installation view of SP, Ginza Sony Park B3. Photo by Alan Gleason

Mohri stresses that the *SP* project, which was set up at Ginza Sony Park from 20 July to 26 August, was not an exhibition per se but rather an ongoing experiment, using the venue not as a gallery but as a studio. Its highlights were three collaborations on three days in August, each with a different artist playing through and with Mohri's inventions for around an hour. Though the performances were not open to the public, they were recorded with plans for future release in a format to be determined. Happily for everyone who wasn't there, some short clips from these sessions have been made available for public viewing. Interested readers will also find more extensive recordings of previous sound collaborations by Mohri, as well as English-language interviews, on her website.

The three events were sonically diverse. The first session took place in the 2nd-basement space given over to the array of speakers that comprise Mohri's work *You Locked Me Up in a Grave, You Owe Me at Least the Peace of a Grave*. Seiichi Yamamoto, a guitarist who has worked with Boredoms, the

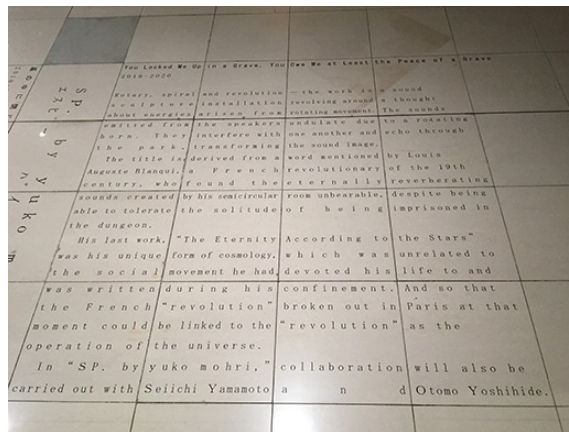
legendary noise-rock band, created a meditative drone that ebbed and flowed through the rotating speakers. The second session was held in the 3rd basement, a former “cargo handling space” with parking-lot lines and numbers still painted on the floor. Standing in the middle of the space was the Stumble Piano, a new work by Mohri with which veteran sound artist Akio Suzuki duetted, bringing the keys to life with sounds he produced from a variety of materials -- bells, rattles, sticks scrap- ing cardboard -- as well as his own voice.



Akio Suzuki and Yuko Mohri performing at SP, Ginza Sony Park B3, 14 August 2020. Photo courtesy of Yuko Mohri and Ginza Sony Park

For the final event, back in the 2nd basement, composer and multi-instrumentalist Otomo Yoshihide, a mainstay of Japan's free-improv scene, tested the sonic effects of a banjo and a bass drum before settling on the turntable as his instrument of choice. The sounds Otomo extracted from the turntable emanated from the rotating speakers as well as a squat, powerful woofer placed face-down on the floor, all of them miked. Mohri explained that these metal-and-wood “sound sculptures,” at once art objects and functioning audio equipment, were inspired by the rotating Leslie speakers familiar to fans of the Hammond organ. Where the Leslie produces a signature swirling sound, Mohri's speakers generate subtler fluctuations in pitch and volume that pulse throughout the room.

In recent years Mohri has made a name for herself both in Japan and overseas, winning numerous awards for works that are equal parts sonic and visual, in which the sound-making components are themselves an expression of artistic ideas. The speaker array at the Ginza venue was previously featured in *Assume That There Is Friction and Resistance* at the Towada Art Center in 2018 and 2019, her first solo exhibition at a museum in Japan. Though based in Tokyo, she has spent much of the past five years abroad, including residencies in New York and London. Her oeuvre, informed by her study of electrical engineering and years of performing with improvisational artists like Yamamoto, Suzuki, and Otomo, largely concerns such intangible phenomena as waves, magnetism, gravity,



Installation view of text about SP, printed on the floor of Ginza Sony Park B2. Photo by Alan Gleason

light and air. To these elements she applies performative strategies in which chance and error figure largely, as in the work of John Cage, an acknowledged influence. She also cites an attraction to “revolution” in its multiple meanings of rotation, radical change, and the orbiting of celestial bodies.

Mohri seems to have envisioned the *SP* project as a once-in-a-lifetime experience of sounds that would vanish into the ether as soon as they came into being, so it is gratifying to know that the three collaborative sessions were recorded and will someday be made public. The use of this venue, temporarily closed by extenuating circumstances, for purposes of artistic experimentation is a commendable response by the artist and by Ginza Sony Park to the strange times we find ourselves in. But it would be a shame if such collaborations came and went like the proverbial trees falling in the forest. I look forward to eventually hearing them in whatever format Mohri and her partners in sound choose to preserve them.

Alan Gleason

Alan Gleason is a translator, editor and writer based in Tokyo, where he has lived for over 30 years. Since 2006 he has edited artscape Japan and written the Here and There column, as well as translating the Picks reviews. He also edits and translates works on Japanese architecture, music, and theater