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It's Nice That



Illustrations: Alva Skag

What does gravity look like? Artist Yuko Mohri's installations make the intangible visible



It's a long-appreciated fact that art has a revelatory quality. It can skew perspectives, broaden opinions and uncover hidden truths. But Ones to Watch 2019 member Yuko Mohri takes this notion one step further by making visible the intangible. Through her installation works, forces like gravity, sound, magnetism and temperature have a discernible presence, filling gallery spaces through her constructed ecosystems.

It was around 2003 that the Kanagawa-born, Tokyo-based artist first began experimenting with such elusive materials. "I was rather interested in things that change with the passage of time," she tells *It's Nice That*, "I was intrigued by the vague, impermanent nature of them." This fascination continued throughout her studies, first at Tama Art University where she gained her BFA and later at Tokyo University of the Arts where Yuko gained her MFA. It wasn't until 2009, however, that Yuko created a series of photographs titled *Moré Moré Tokyo (Water Leak Tokyo)* which would go on to form her practice.

Taken within the sprawling subways of Tokyo, the series documented the water-damaged areas of various stations. Where leaks appeared, station staff used whatever they could find lying around – be it bottles, buckets, umbrellas or tubing – to stem the flow, creating bricolage sculptures that battle with the groundwater eating away at the city's infrastructure. Both functional and beautiful, the discovery of these real-world Ready mades proved pivotal in shaping Yuko's use of found materials. After exhibiting this initial series of photographs, Yuko went on to create her own sculptures, which have become increasingly elaborate over the years. In her 2015 edition of the work, *Moré Moré [Leaky]: The Falling Water Given* the artist purposefully caused leaks in specific sites, improvising sculptures in response to plug the leaks, exhibiting whatever assemblage was formed as a result.

Improvisation, although not a word often associated with the practice of artists, especially those who exhibit in established galleries, is at the heart of Yuko's work. Her pieces evolve idiosyncratically out of a space, never producing the same work twice. "I don't depict a vision of a whole sculpture from the beginning," she tells *It's Nice That*, "I always want to value the inspiration I get from the place and the encounter with it. Even if it is a simple white cube, each place has its features, such as the texture of the floor, or how the sound reverberates, how the light comes from the window, or how the subtle wind of an air conditioner flows."

This method of working imbues Yuko's work with an effervescence, particularly evident when encountering her pieces in real life. Her sculptures are the result of chance, coincidence and trial and error resulting in large-scale, kinetic chains of reaction, not possible under any other circumstances. A person's presence in the exhibition causes a trumpet to start playing, such as in *Calls*, or light sensors triggered by the tails of tropical fish control the pedals of an organ, the bellows of which send compasses spinning and spoons rotating in other

corners of the room, as was the case in Voluta. Yuko's installations are full of intriguing moments such as these which, when brought together by the artist, form newly isolated ecosystems "peculiar to the exhibition space".

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"I admire dancers or musicians who spontaneously change their music or choreography according to their feelings or the situation they are in," Yuko explains. It's a process which can be seen in Yuko's practice all the way back to her studies, years before she began building elaborate sculptures to fill the Camden Arts Centre or a room at Palais de Tokyo. "When I was an art school student, I used to take machines to pieces," she recalls. "I often bought a cheap, used audio amplifier, speaker, or a broken seismometer, and took them to pieces." Working without an agenda or intention, Yuko allowed these parts to dictate her work: "It was very fun to know how they function. I'd always rather get to know things from the machines themselves than from the specialists." Today, it's these machine parts which when combined with a welly boot or a coil of copper make Yuko's work spin, fly or sing.

Although the process in which Yuko's installations come to be is a large facet of her practice, the objects she uses are just as important. "In Japanese," she explains, "there is an expression 'you no bi' which translates to 'the beauty of use' that means enlightening everyday objects through using them." It's a concept well-known to the world of art – taking mundanity and elevating it and, in turn, questioning our definition of art. But Yuko's approach is somewhat different. It's born from a deep appreciation of each object and the invisible force she is visualising. Her installations, which frame a space to highlight its personality, simultaneously do the same for each component of her fabrications. It's a concept not dissimilar to that of Shakkei in Japanese culture, which involves incorporating background landscapes, such as mountains or woodlands, into the composition of a garden.

Using borrowed scenery in this manner and combining it with found objects raises interesting questions around agency within Yuko's work, a fact she embraces. It is the objects that are doing the work, she explains, "so I consider myself the first audience. I am always so happy when I see unexpected expressions from my objects."

What makes Yuko's work ultimately so captivating, however, is the way it invites interaction. Although filling the spaces of galleries in a somewhat traditional manner, Yuko's ability to engage is altogether modern. Gone are the days of shuffling round white boxes with hushed voices when artists like Yuko are around. Her ability to inject serendipity into everything she does turns the gallery into a playground. And that's not to say her work lacks substance; lying beyond its facade is a practice rooted in fascinating conceptual exploration and years of investigation. "The fact is," she muses, when asked why she is so deeply interested in forces like wind, sound and light, "they are the primordial rule of life. They are the most important elements, but we can't find, feel or see them in our everyday life." In turn, Yuko's works take on another layer of intrigue. They remind us of *how* we exist, the reasons the globe keeps spinning and the sun keeps rising.

With a busy 2019 ahead of her – exhibitions are already planned in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Ibaraki and Australia – we're hoping the Japanese artist will come good on her remark: "I really hope to have another chance to show my works in London." We'll be waiting...