

YUKO MOHRI

Electric Smelly Orchestra

INTERVIEW BY HG MASTERS



Installation view of YUKO MOHRI's *Decomposition*, 2022, fruit, speaker, cable, wood, computer, dimensions variable, at "Art & New Ecology," The 5th Floor, Tokyo, 2022. Photo by Naoki Takehisa.

All images courtesy the artist, Project Fulfill Art Space (Taipei), mother's tankstation (Dublin/London), Yutaka Kikutake Gallery (Tokyo), and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery (New York/LA).

A bowl of fruit is a classical subject in European painting. A long roll of paper might provide the perfect surface for a calligrapher's strokes or an ink painter's depiction of a beautiful landscape. A well-tuned piano's strings vibrate at just the right frequencies for the musician sitting in front of it and playing its keys. Yuko Mohri, however, has other ideas about the potentials for these objects and materials: ones that you didn't necessarily expect to see, or hear—or even smell. Visitors to the Japan Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024 will have an opportunity to encounter Mohri's latest installation. Fruit will be a component, she says, as will electricity as a source of sound, motion, and lighting, among other experiential elements. Her project for Venice builds on several series she worked on during the years of the pandemic, when disruption to normalcy became its own paradigm of unpredictability, when the order of the world was more unstable and precarious.

Born in 1980 in Kanagawa, Mohri studied sound art in the Department of Inter-Media Art at Tokyo University of the Arts, graduating with an MFA in 2006. In the two decades since, she has received the Nissan Art Award (2015) and has exhibited widely in major exhibitions, from Roppongi Crossing at Mori Art Museum to the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, both in 2016. In 2023, curator Sook-Kyung Lee featured Mohri's *I/O* (2021–) installation at the 14th Gwangju Biennale, "Soft and Weak Like Water," and Lee will curate Mohri's presentation in the Japan Pavilion at Venice this year. The artist is already looking ahead to creating an installation for the massive Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan in 2025. In this conversation, Mohri reflects on her recent projects and shares her pre-Venice preparations just before she embarked on sourcing materials and working on site.



Portrait of YUKO MOHRI at "rīvus," 23rd Biennale of Sydney, 2022. Photo by Four Minutes to Midnight.



Installation view of YUKO MOHRI's *More More (Leaky): Variations, 2022*, hose, PET bottles, bucket, sponge, pump, acrylic resin, dimensions variable, at "rīvus," 23rd Biennale of Sydney, 2022. Photo by Four Minutes to Midnight.

Your presentation in the Japan Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale will harness the power of fruit—or, more precisely, the electromagnetic resistance in the liquid found inside fruit. How did you become interested in fruits as conductors of electricity and how did you envision this potential within your art practice?

To be clear, the fruit is not generating electricity. Instead, it is creating electrical resistance. Fruit, like us humans, is organic, and everything organic conducts electricity. But the resistance is not stable. It is unique and depends on the body. Due to the number of electrons, the fluids are constantly changing resistance as a result of elements such as humidity and then, over time, decay. For my *Decomposition* (2021–) series, electricity is passed through the fruit and the current is converted into sound that changes pitch as the electrical resistance fluctuates.

The first test I did was about 18 years ago. If you have seen a resistor, it resembles a cucumber or an eggplant. This made me think about the relationship between vegetables, fruit, and electricity for the first time. In the Electric Town (DenDen Town) of Osaka in 2006, I brought some cucumbers and eggplants to an electrical-supply store and stuck a tester into them as part of an artwork, initially to reveal the level of electrical resistance. Not long after I had the chance to present my performance at an art class run by Kenjiro Okazaki, where, again, I inserted an electrode into a banana to measure its resistance until it decayed. Over the next decade these experiments with fruits stayed on my mind.

Usually for my exhibitions I want to be there and install by myself because I care about the various conditions: gravity, humidity, dust, lighting. My intention is to utilize these fluidities and changes within the unique environment every time, as a boost, and to incorporate them as another part of my work. Though these elements are not clearly visible to our eyes, their state changes easily depending on the exhibition site. My objects and installations capture these changes with a multisensory system, akin to a feedback system or ecosystem.

During the pandemic, I was invited by the curators of "trust & confusion" [Xue Tan and Raimundas Malašauskas] to make a new project at Tai Kwun Contemporary in Hong Kong. However, for this project, I had no idea how to investigate the site without stepping into the environment. But I remembered that if I used fruits, they would change all the time and adapt to the site.

At that time, I had to watch my installations being assembled remotely, on my computer screen, so I couldn't notice the details. Using fruits in my artwork also brought up another element. In 2022, I participated in an exhibition at The 5th Floor, an experimental, alternative space in Tokyo. It was only toward the end of the exhibition that I was able to enter the space in order to witness my own work. I had instructed them to replace the fruits with new ones at regular intervals, but for some reason my instruction wasn't followed. It was a hot summer, and over the course of one month the same fruits were displayed and the exhibition space was filled with a sweet stench. I immediately realized that the fruits were decaying and small fruit flies clung to them—but it was not an unpleasant feeling. The scene reminded me of the "nine stages of decay," a classic theme depicting brutal transformation and purification in Buddhist paintings.



Installation view of YUKO MOHRI's *Piano Solo (Ohara, Rain and Birds)* (2021), MIDI piano, display, speaker, microphone, cable, dimensions variable, at Glasgow International, Tramway, Glasgow, 2021. Photo by Matthew Barnes.

How do you imagine using fruit for your installation in the Japan Pavilion?

It's a great opportunity for me to freely express various ideas that I've been thinking about, developing, and experimenting with across various projects during the pandemic years. For Venice, the pavilion is an expansion of recent projects, including *More More (Leaky): Variations* (2022) at the 23rd Biennale of Sydney in 2022. The use of fruits in my artworks is a crucial element in introducing coincidence and chance. Also, the situation in which various types of fruits are placed together is a symbol of today's world. The important thing is that we are all living entities placed here, in this world together. Electricity is another important element, as a source of sound, motion, and lighting, among others.

This year's Venice Biennale will be the first since the end of the pandemic in which audiences from all over the world will gather together. I want to create my installation utilizing sound, smell, and light—all unique to the site in an environment filled with the dynamics of change. Hopefully everyone can physically experience this through all of their senses.

At the end of January I am going to Venice to find and collect materials locally and assemble them on site. I have no intention of wasting any materials in my artworks. "Shipping" myself will be more environmentally and financially friendly than shipping finished works or materials all the way from Japan! I want to feel Venice—the exhibition site, the Japan Pavilion—with all my senses, and I want to source local materials to adapt on site. Digging up materials gives me such joy, and I'm always eager for fresh inspiration in my new surroundings.

In projects such as *Piano Solo* (2021) you combined musical instruments and "found," or ambient, sounds. How do you think about the relationship between music and other audible or sonic elements in your work?

In my practice, in general, sound really means "acoustic sound." So not only the sound of the object but also the roots or the cause of the sound. For example, if there's a machine hitting a drum, it's not just the drum that I care about, but also the motor of the machine. Sometimes I call myself a "sound-installation" artist but really, I'm more of a "kinetic sculpture" artist that includes sound and other elements.

I started my practice as a member of a band where I grew up in Kanagawa. There was no museum for contemporary art, and various musical activities led to my encounter with experimental music, which ultimately offered me a different worldview. Last Christmas I ordered an LP box set by Obscure Records, founded by Brian Eno, and a vinyl of *Contradictions* by Yan Jun. Inside the shipping packaging was a design featuring John Cage's quote, "Everything we do is music," which resonates deeply with my practice and philosophy. I believe the world is already filled with sounds; we just don't usually perceive them as music.

During the pandemic, I had quite a lot of time to contemplate the meaning of my practice. I moved to the countryside when the city locked down and started working on field recordings in the quiet environment. To collect such recordings day by day almost became like a new journey.

In *Piano Solo (Ohara, Rain and Birds)* (2021), for the Glasgow International 2021, I sent these materials to Glasgow. This work was made by an automatic piano to imitate natural sounds generated from three field recordings. With 12 keys dividing an octave, the notes on a piano are very stable—some call it "The King of Instruments." But when a piano imitates natural sounds made on a spectrum, the result is very unnatural and the sounds can be clumsy. While this can be heard as an error in the instrument, my ears are captivated by those humorous flaws.

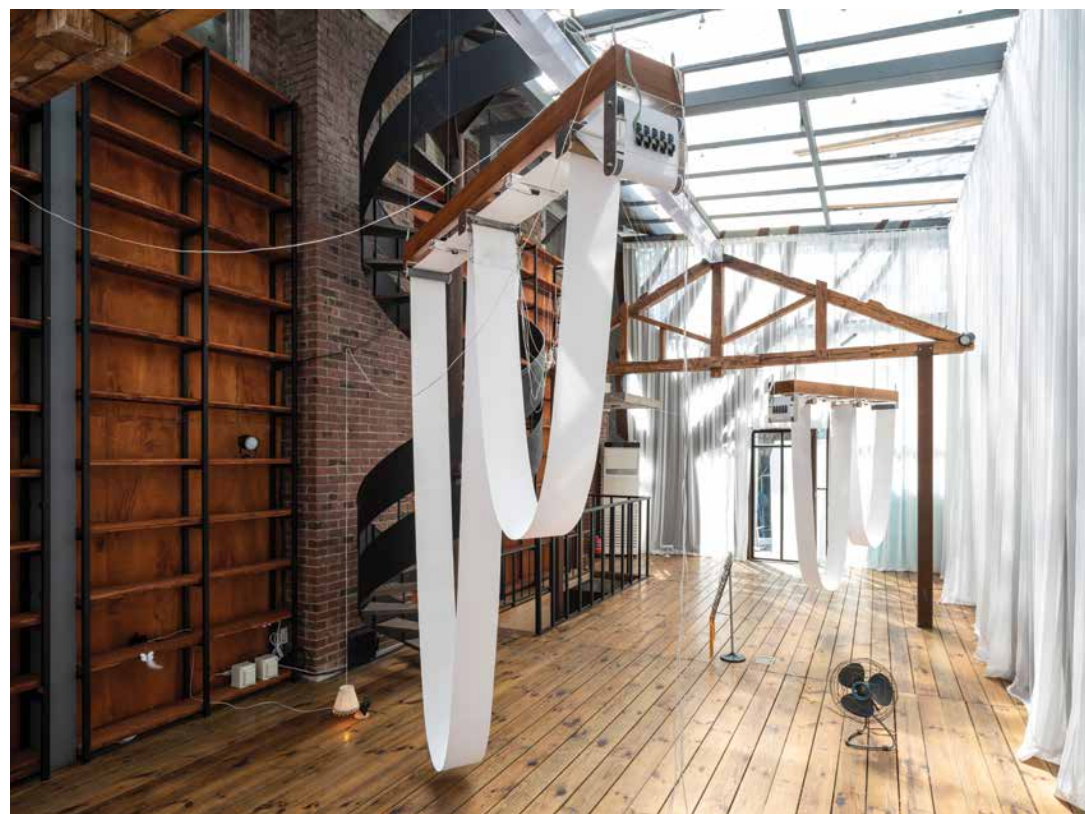
The project 2 *SOLOS (Quarantine)* (2021), for the Asian Art Biennale 2021, also originated from field recordings. During my time in hotels in Amsterdam for quarantine, I woke up early every morning to the sound of various birds singing, which I managed to record. Back in Tokyo, I was quarantined next to a tennis court, which allowed me to capture the rhythmical sound of the balls being hit. I merged the collection of recordings from those two locations in the work.

Returning to your question, I often contemplate the history of experimental music, especially Erik Satie, John Cage, Alvin Lucier,

and other, similar musicians. In my view, the way Satie composed his music boldly integrated concrete, real-world principles into the music, instead of complicating the musical system as seen in the case of 12-tone music. *Musique concrète* is a tradition in French music. Thanks to Satie's groundbreaking works, it appears that the relationship between sound, music, and art entered a new era. Drawing inspiration from his contributions, I paid my tribute to his legacy in my early work, *Vexation* – c.i.p. (2006).

How do the *I/O* (2011–) installations become ecosystems in themselves, or how are they models for the systems-of-relations around them?

In the *I/O* series the paper is looped and both ends are connected. As the paper slowly moves, it subtly adapts to the exhibition space, and so, in the end, it creates its own ecosystem. The final result is unknown to anybody, including myself, as the feedback relates to the various factors in the space, including how visitors behave there.



Installation view of YUKO MOHRI's *I/O* (2021), roll paper, bell-lyra, duster, motor, LED light, light bulb, blinds, toilet paper, spoon, censor, etc., dimensions variable, at "soft and weak like water," 14th Gwangju Biennale, Horanggasinamu Art Polygon, Gwangju, 2023. Photo by gimworkers.



YUKO MOHRI, *Composition of Decomposition #01*, 2023, acrylic, ink, felt-tip pen on canvas, 60 × 60 cm. Photo by Osamu Sakamoto.



YUKO MOHRI, *Composition of Decomposition #02*, 2023, acrylic, ink, felt-tip pen on canvas, 60 × 60 cm. Photo by Osamu Sakamoto.

My artworks constantly change in form and movement. So the conclusion of my work does not happen in my studio—rather, that is the beginning of constructing a sensitive relationship to each unique environment. The change in the various elements depends on the environment of each exhibition space and triggers my artwork to respond. In other words, I'm not a creator of the ecosystem, but, naturally and uncontrollably during the process of my work being displayed, the environment comes to the surface on its own. I think this is the great pleasure of my kinetic artworks.

You can consider my pieces as sensors, environments, or living entities. My works need a gardener, or a caregiver, like those at a zoo or an aquarium, where constant attention is needed. For example, at the Gwangju Biennale in 2023, when I showed *I/O* in a glass house with a lot of humidity, the paper responded to the excess moisture, especially during the rainy days, and it sometimes got stuck in the machine. The exhibition staff spent hours discussing how to take care of that situation and my work and managed to guide the paper well after that. I appreciated and admired their attitude and the way they cared about how the artwork can adapt to the conditions that vary every day in that particular space. I often sense that the staff responsible for maintaining my artwork grasp its intricacies more profoundly than anyone else. They become integral parts of the overall ecosystem. This role extends to functioning as a feedback system. Initially, there might be some confusion or emergencies, but then we have to adapt.

Since you began the *Moré Moré (Leaky)* series, you've been observing and then creating your own "leaky" situations. What interested you about them originally and how have ideas in chance and ad hoc constructions fed into your more recent projects?

Recently, I have been employing chance and ad hoc conditions as triggers, such as the ambiguous form of water in *Moré Moré (Leaky)*, the decaying material of fruit in *Decomposition*, or the work *For the Birds* (2021), in which I incorporate wild bird calls for altering the text. For me, chance serves as a great means to incorporate a bit of nature's richness and inconvenience into my work.

What role does drawing play in your practice and thinking?

I constantly make drawings. There are small ones for my notes, and I also draw diagrams of my work. These diagrams are important since I often need them to map power sources and show how the components connect to each other. Ultimately, invisible elements such as the direction of electricity, the occurrence of magnetic fields, light and sound, can also be expressed on paper. This is what I try to capture in my drawings.

You work with found objects as well as with sound and elements of chance. How do you think about your artistic lineages in terms of 20th-century practitioners in Japan and internationally?

My practice is very much influenced by the Fluxus movement, especially experimental artists such as Nam June Paik, Shigeko Kubota, and Yoko Ono. They brought many influential ideas that resonated not only in Asia but also in Europe and the United States—updating the art form. I really admire that there are no boundaries between the different expressive formats in their practices, from drawings to performances and music. This aspect is also significant in the context of our own East Asian traditions, although their effects may not yet be well known to many people.

In my hometown, when I was a university student, the modern art museum held a retrospective for the artist Takehisa Kosugi, who was a Fluxus member and a composer for the Merce

Cunningham Dance Company. It was a shock to me. He used many found objects, like disposable plastic boxes, in order to make installations and sound works. This really impacted me. I learned from Kosugi the idea that familiar everyday objects can be transformed into art. Later, at the Lyon Biennale in 2017, David Tudor, a colleague of Kosugi at the Cunningham Company, and I were exhibiting our artworks—his *Rainforest* and my *Moré Moré (Leaky)*—in two rooms next to each other. Both rooms were filled with daily necessities. By the way, the work of Duchamp, the original creator of readymades, was also on display in my room; this curation created very powerful connections between our works.

Since you began the *Moré Moré (Leaky)* series, you've been observing and then creating your own "leaky" situations. What interested you about them originally and how have ideas in chance and ad hoc constructions fed into your more recent projects, including your plans for Venice?

Without a doubt, water is firmly linked to the idea of my presentation in Venice—along with fruits. Our physical bodies are made of water, and we largely depend on water's liquidity to sustain these circular systems. Water is also something that humans try to control. However, it is very difficult for us to do so, as history tells us. Sometimes it causes emergencies—and

leaking is one of them—and that encourages humans to devise new forms of creativity.

In situations of attempting to control water, there exists a cause-and-effect dynamic. Through my extensive fieldwork in Tokyo subway stations, I have consistently documented such occurrences. I'm always particularly fascinated by the station employees who, faced with water leaks seeping through construction cracks, ingeniously employ found objects—plastic sheets, umbrellas, buckets, or anything that they can think of—to address the issue. These objects, although makeshift, become remarkably sculptural. Furthermore, the leading water leak is affected by gravity, so in the *Moré Moré (Leaky)* installations, my interest is not directed at creating a traditional sculptural arrangement of materials. I'm more fascinated by following the shape of water, so that the form of the sculpture follows the direction of the water.

As a result of the large earthquake that hit Japan's Hokuriku region on New Year's Day this year, approximately 20,000 liters of oil leaked into the sea from a transformer at the Shika nuclear power plant. How to solve these problems is also closely connected to the situation—like a water leak in the Tokyo subway—explored in my *Moré Moré (Leaky)* series. Creating an artwork, much less a great one, may be challenging for us, but preventing water leaks is much more straightforward, and comparatively more manageable.



YUKO MOHRI, *Asakusa Station*, October 24, 2015, from the series *Moré Moré Tokyo (Leaky Tokyo): Fieldwork*, 2009–21, digital C-print, 100 × 150 cm.



YUKO MOHRI, *Shinjuku Station*, November 2, 2015, from the series *Moré Moré Tokyo (Leaky Tokyo): Fieldwork*, 2009–21, digital C-print, 100 × 150 cm.