

## Feature **Sound, technology and art: volume 1. Yuko Mohri**

I head in the direction from which the clattering sound is coming, and something flashes behind me. Whip around to see what it is, and something else clunks into motion, this time on the ceiling. All kinds of little tricks lurk within the spaces created by artist Yuko Mohri. Much like mischievous poltergeists or sprites, they taunt and call to you from afar. But when you are feeling prepared to encounter them, you discover that they're all in hiding, and you won't get even a peep out of them. These must surely be the most contrary machines in history. Yet as I walk about the installation, looking here and there, anticipating what is about to happen next, I find that generally enjoy the experience of being played about with by this space, much like by a capricious cat. So, what are the thoughts of the artist responsible for its design on notions such as sound, space and machinery? We find out.

**Tell us how it was that you came to start incorporating technology into your works of art.**

I took Information Design at Tama Art University, so I was studying artistic forms directly related to media art from my student days on. Through my studies at university, the range of media that I used expanded slightly, veering away from things like oils and sculpture, and I began to think about the territory where only computers and information and machines can be used in creation.

**Were you in to things like games and computers before you entered university?**

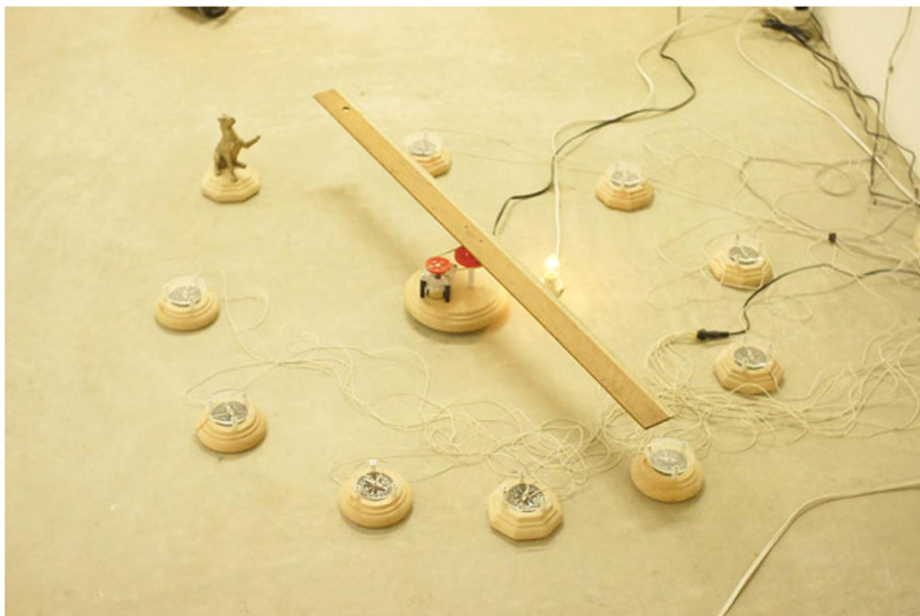
We had a NES at home, but we didn't have any games for it (laughs), and I only bought a computer after entering university, so it wasn't that I was particularly into that stuff, no. I liked music, though. For a while I thought that I wanted to become a musician, so I was practicing for that. Also, I was always motivated by the quite vague thought of wanting to do something that nobody else was doing. At that time I didn't really understand what sound art meant, but I wanted to investigate ways of expression that used music, or scientific elements. At university I took Seiko Mikami's seminars, and I found those works of art we studied there where science, technology, and video and performing arts were all mixed, like those by the artist group Dumb Type or early works by Norimizu Ameya, really interesting.

So you became interested in the sort of things that come about when computers and machinery are used in art.

Yes. Like for example, what is the 'space' in cyberspace? It's not an actual space, so it's pretty hard to imagine, and quite difficult to get it across to other people. I think it we would feel digital space as a much more physical thing if we could perceive it with our senses, like in William Gibson's Neuromancer, or the films Blade Runner or The Matrix, or more recently Inception. The Matrix is old now, but I think it was a crucial work in spreading the idea of something that was really hard for most people to imagine. That's something I'd really like for my works to do - to show people the fascination of the 'invisible parts'. It's the question of how you go about showing those things like electricity or sound or gravity that you can't see with the eye. When I was a student I was interested in magnetism, and was taken with the phrase 'extra-perceptual phenomena'.



Exhibition at the waitingroom gallery. CIRCLES (triptych), 2012, Photo by Hideto Maezawa



Exhibition at the adanda space in Osaka. CIRCUITS (triptych), 2012, Photo by Seiichi Yamamoto

I feel as though those kinds of physics-related and invisible phenomena are media art's special territory in a way. It's how the artist goes about showing that illustrates their particular awareness, their Weltanschauung. How do you go about creating that Weltanschauung, that includes all the movement, in your works?

In 2012, I had private shows at three spaces--gallery waitingroom, adanda and the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo's Bloomberg Pavilion--and the key words that emerged from that experience were 'hacking' and 'dowsing'. For the three exhibitions, I built the same piece in three different spaces, each with its own special requirements. I start putting my works together at home, collecting together things that will form material for the works--puppets, springs, everyday goods and the like--and then I look at each of those ingredients while I'm lying down on my futon, thinking about how it would be best to make it move. Then I move them one by one to my work table. When I've done a bit of work on them, I go to sleep again. Then I collect up the parts that I've done the work on, take them to the exhibition space, and put them all together.

So in other words, my work begins with a process of 'hacking' the small constituents that I have. Take, for example, with a cup. Usually we think of a cup as placed on a desk or a chair or something, in a state where gravity is acting on it. Change this state slightly, and have the cup crashing in to something else and creating a noise, we start to perceive it as a different object.

Then, when I'm putting the small constituents together on site, I try to read as much into the atmosphere of the exhibition space, the unique qualities like the light, the temperature, the humidity and the view. This is a task just like searching for minerals, or dowsing. Even if the gallery is just a white cube space, I still try to make use as much as possible of features like the intentions of the architectural design, or how the walls have been painted over, as each of these has an individuality to it.



Exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo's Bloomberg Pavilion CIRCUS (triptych), 2012, Photo by Kenshu Shintsubo

Your latest work is currently (December 2012) on display as part of the 'Anonymous Life' exhibition at the NTT InterCommunication Center (ICC). With this one, it feels like there are live things in the installation space, or to go even further, as if the space itself is alive. Was that your intention, to take these small constituents and use them to breathe life into the space, as if animating it?

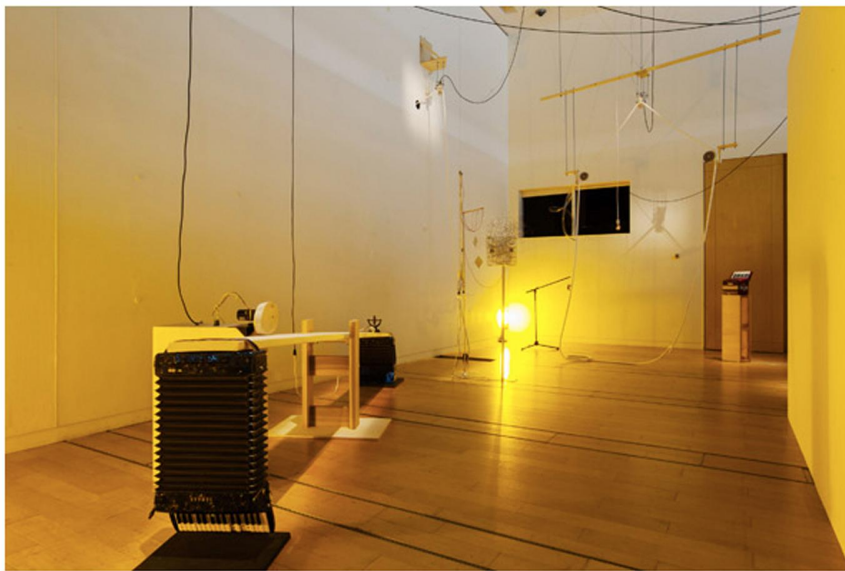
I feel like it's less giving it life, and more like imbuing it with a kind of sentiment. For example, when you see fraying string gently swaying, your feeling is that the string is really exerting itself admirably. This is a sort of extension of that. So the work at the ICC this time uses rope, and if there was some rope just coming straight out from the wall you probably wouldn't think anything at all, but when it comes creeping out slowly from a hole, then you get the feeling that it's really doing its best to make it out of there. When these kinds of sentiments accumulate, you end up feeling like the things are alive. Objects are just objects, machines are just machines. I don't think there's any such thing as giving them life. My ideas about ghosts and spirits are an extension of this as well: I think that when there are a number of coincidences in the physical world, we end up viewing that as a ghost or a spirit. Ghosts are in our mind, rather than in the world, but with just a little bit of sentiment inserted, then we feel as if the exhibition space or the work has its own life. I pay great attention to placing those sentimental switches in all kinds of different places.

**This might end up as a 'what is life' conversation, which is of course tricky territory... But I feel that if you use electric signals to change something's shape, or give it movement, then you are changing that thing by giving it energy, and if you call that life, then you are in a sense giving it life, no?**

There are scientists who think so, aren't there. That if you make a certain substance move according to certain principles for ten thousand years or whatever, then that substance is being given life through external stimuli. There also people who are studying this area as a direction in which for technology to head, but I'm not really convinced about it. I feel like 'giving something life' is a divine act, and it feels conceited to claim that we're doing it too.

**I see what you mean (laughs). Tell us a bit about your work for the ICC exhibition.**

The work is called fort-da, which means 'peek-a-boo' in German. I've had a part time job in the ICC before, and it's the place where I've done the most exhibitions, so I know the structure of the building and the backyard pretty well. I thought I'd try and use that knowledge in constructing the installation this time. So I asked the gallery to leave the backyard clear, and used it as one of the ingredients in my installation. I feel like the backyard is like the 'unconscious' supporting the visible world that is the exhibition space, and so I made a piece that goes between the two. In terms of its structure, rope is passed through holes in the floor and the walls. As the rope goes back and forwards, dust and dirt builds up on the surfaces around, and I took that dirt as a kind of signal, which is then reflected in the movement of other devices in the piece.



fort-da at the NTT InterCommunication Center (ICC) exhibition, 2012, Photo by Fuminari Yoshitsugu

To add slightly to the explanation of the word 'fort-da', 'fort' means 'gone' and 'da' means 'there'. In the Freudian interpretation of the game, the child compensates symbolically for the disappearance of the mother by repeating the cycle of 'gone' followed by 'here'. The game can also be interpreted as a play with 'there' (death) and 'here' (life). In this exhibition, with the theme of 'Anonymous Life', your work makes the architecture itself appear alive. The rope feels like blood vessels, and the light is a bit like a heartbeat.

Yes, and the accordion is a bit like a lung. The piece doesn't have a human shape, but it's like a man-made human. I think that buildings are basically quite human constructions. They breathe in lots of people during the day, then breathe them out at night and go to sleep.

I once had a ghostly experience in France. I was staying at this hotel which was about 600 years old, where the walls had been painted over many, many times. And when I tried to open the room door it wouldn't open. I kept trying but I just couldn't do it, so I called the old man at reception, and it opened just fine for him. That's weird, I thought. And then when I got in the bath, I tried to open the window in the bathroom, but again, it wouldn't open. So I asked the old man again, and it opened totally normally for him. At that time I thought, this hotel has got something against me. So I went outside and bought wine and cheese, came back to the hotel and gave them as an offering, saying 'I'm much indebted to you.' I haven't had any problems since that time (laughs).

I've thought on what that experience was about since. At that time, I was travelling to France alone with no internet and no mobile phone, unable to speak French, and so my senses were really on full alert. This building that had recorded 600 years of history kind of reacted to my nervous 'energy'. At that time, I thought of the building as a kind of data storage device. Like I said before, I feel like phenomena like ghosts and so on definitely happen when those kinds of historical recording and physical phenomena overlap coincidentally, for some reason or another. The ropes that I use as a motif in my work actually symbolize 'there' and 'here'. Here and gone, here and there... I feel like it would be great if that kind of unusual happening took place at the ICC exhibition space too.

I see... To jump back a bit, your works have a kind of sense of nostalgia to them--or perhaps the feeling as if we're stepping into your bedroom. But there's a delicacy to that sense. It doesn't come pressing in on you. You have to pay attention in order to notice it. There's something about that which feels quite feline to me.

Feline!? Really? Personally, I really like the itty-bitty parts of my work, with the small, thin objects moving about. There are some bits which only light up once a day. For some reason I always want to create those kinds of things. An installation is a place where you have a special kind of experience. Of course it's fun if there are big things clunking around--the exhibition at the ICC lies towards that end of the scale--but I like the feeling of small bits distorting the space bit by bit. I feel like it would be great to make a kind of space which seems at first glance like just a normal room, but then you notice some kind of distortion to it, some kind of sign of life, or a gust of wind...

I really like architecture. I like sort of the modern buildings produced by Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright--they're really stylish and I have great respect for them--but at the same time I feel that they're so big that they're beyond opposition. What I can do within a building, a space with a certain kind of power, is to create small events here and there, thereby distorting that space. Particularly after the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, I am conscious of finding ways to surpass or to shift the presence of those kinds of big buildings.



Installation view of with "without records"  
Otomo Yoshihide limited ensembles  
(Yoshihide Otomo, Yasutomo Aoyama, Sachiko M, Kanta Horio, Yuko Mohri)  
From the 'Art & Music--Search for New Synesthesia' exhibition  
currently on at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo.

I'd like to ask you a bit about sound. You're involved with Yoshihide Otomo's 'ensembles', and the piece with "without records" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo exhibition is part of that collaboration.



Making work with Otomo has been a big impetus for me to start thinking about sound again. I've made sound installation works since my student days, like my piece *Vexations*, which uses the Eric Satie piece as a motif. In the work, the original Satie piece is played by an automatic piano, then that sound, including all the reverberations and background noise, is all fed into a computer, which is then played on the automatic piano. As this cycle continues, the original piece evolves. At that time, what was crucial was the sense of creating a piece that went back and forth between the computerized phenomenon and the actual event, and the sound itself was just a material. It was about the concept, rather than wanting to using sound as a main component.

The 'ensembles' project with Otomo is about making works as if you were in a band and so we're really free to produce works how we like. Otomo is a musician, and I'm surprised every time by the ways he combines sound and space, or by his ways of hearing sound. In the work this time, I'm experimenting with distorting space on both a micro and a macro level. So in one part I've got a thick rope suspended from the ceiling, which is used to whisk up the space. Then, in contrast to that, there's the setting up the components of a piano in a small exhibition space, and making lots of things happen in that space.

**There are lots of artists who incorporate technological elements in their works, but I think that rather than trying to make technology interesting, your works are conceptual, and are about giving a jolt to people's sensibilities--and then, in front of all that, there are machines and gravity and the like. And I don't sense a feminist-like quality to your work, but I think that there definitely is a certain femininity about it. Where does that come from, I wonder?**



'Connecting World' Closing event,  
Yuko Mohri and Soichiro Mihara Vexations - c.i.p.@Tokyo Opera City  
Photo provided by NTT InterCommunication Center (ICC).

**毛利** (Laughs.) Yes, where does that come from? I haven't put it into words yet, so maybe somewhere inside of me, there's a silent woman... There are a number of female artists working with technology, but amongst them, I'm not really one to accentuate feminine elements in my work. And yet it comes out somehow, doesn't it. Whether or not I want to emphasise it or not, it's a part that I want to analyse for myself.

Anonymous Life

Runs: Now - 3 March 2013

Venue: NTT InterCommunication Center (ICC)

Tokyo Opera City Tower 4F, 3-20-2 Nishishinjuku, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo 163-1404 Japan

Opening Hours: 11am - 6 pm. Closed Mondays, New Year (28 Dec - 4 Jan) and 10 February.

Entrance Fee: General admission; University students: 500 yen. School students: free.

<http://www.ntticc.or.jp/>

Text\_Keiko Kamiyo

Translation\_Polly Barton

#### **Yuko Mohri**

Born in 1980. Artist. Creates organic and humorous installations that fill the entire gallery space using special mechanical devices. Whilst a university student, she created the piece Vexations (2006, collaborative work with Soichiro Mihara), which reproduces Eric Satie's piece on a piano with added background noise. The work has been shown both inside and outside Japan, winning her the Transmediale 2006 Silver Prize and an honorary mention in the Interactive Art category of Ars Electronica 2006. From 2009 onwards, she has been involved as an artist in musician Yoshihide Otomo's project 'ensembles'. In 2012, displayed her work Circus in the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo's Bloomberg Pavilion.

<http://www.mohrizm.net/>