

ArtReview Asia

Yuko Mohri

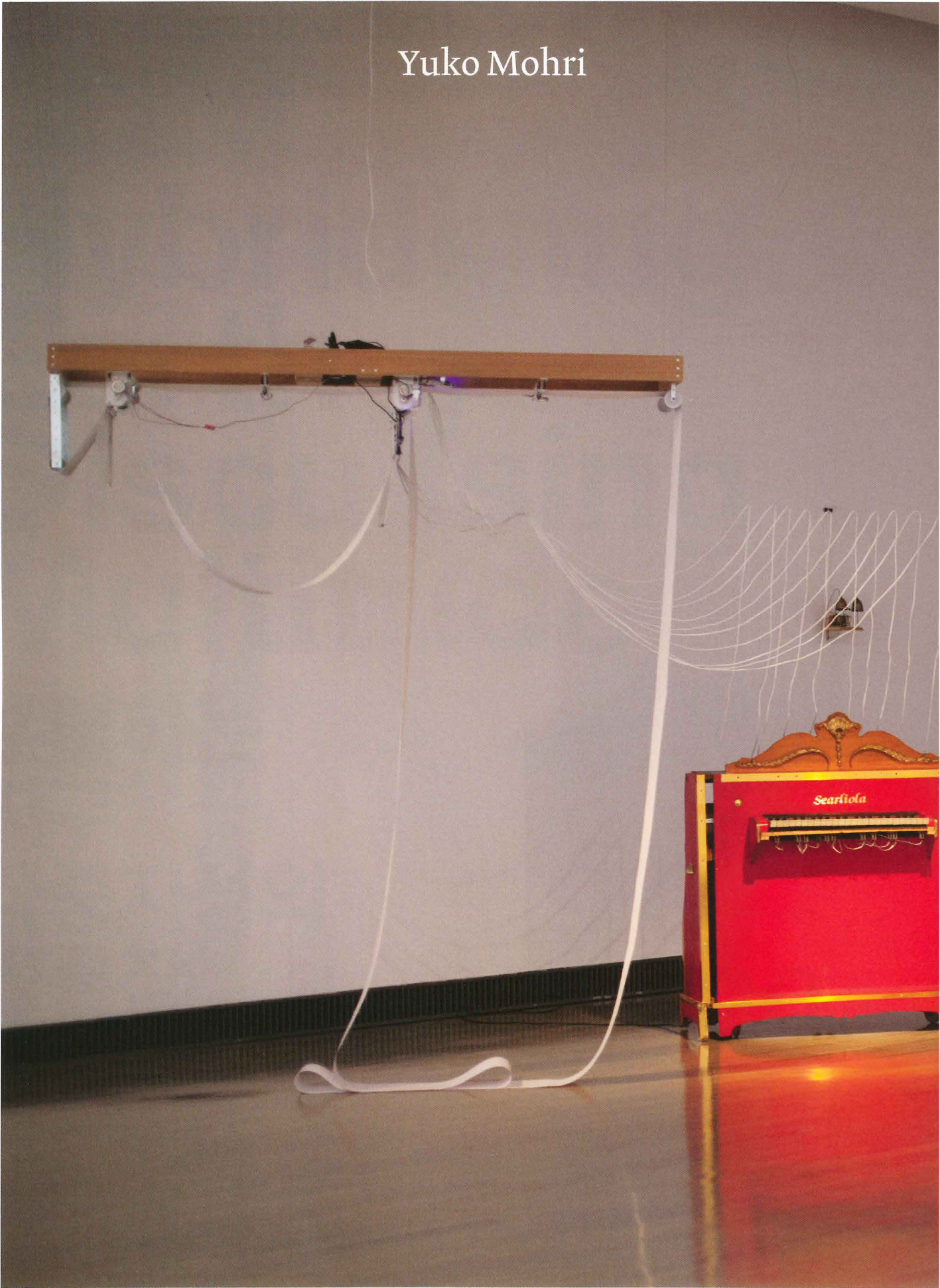
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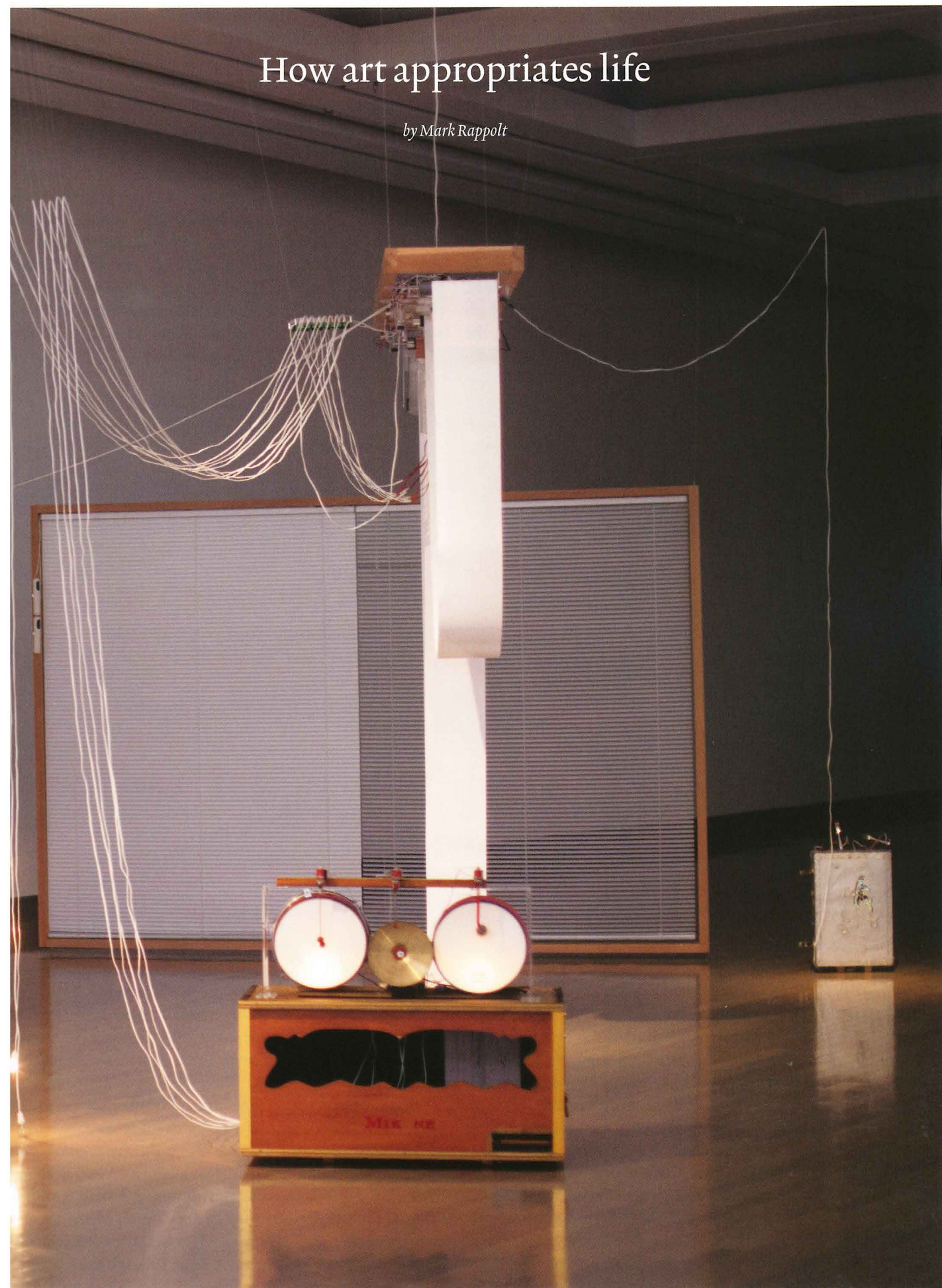
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Yuko Mohri



How art appropriates life

by Mark Rappolt



Yuko Mohri's *I/O: Chamber of a Musical Composer* (2014) is a room-size installation in which looping, continuous rolls of paper, suspended from wooden frames attached to the ceiling, slowly unfold and droop down to touch the floor. By the time they are spooled back up, they have collected (in a less-than-obvious way) traces of dust and dirt gathered during that fleeting moment of surface contact. These markings then provide an automatic score for a series of musical instruments, spread out across the space and decorated in a carnivalesque red and gold, that bang, chime and wheeze in seemingly random fashion. The instruments are also attached to a series of winking fair-ground lights and a framed window-blind that opens and closes as a current passes through it, acting as a surrogate stage-curtain or backdrop (depending on your point of view) to the performance. Beyond the obvious connections in this enclosed circuit (which include the influence of Fischli Weiss's 1987 *The Way Things Go*), the instruments themselves – a homemade organ, drums and bells – enclose another narrative: they were once the property of Oklahoma-born Victor Clark Searle, who emigrated to Japan during the 1950s, after his father was assigned to General Douglas MacArthur's staff. Searle stayed on in Japan, working as a musician, composer and teacher, and on his death, in 2012, Mohri had only met him once, but inherited a collection of his instruments, many of which he had made himself (Searle's homemade glockenspiel, together with another window blind, is the centrepiece of Mohri's *Oni-bi (fen fire)*, 2013–14).

It's fair to say that in person Mohri can make her oftentimes complex installations, and indeed the whole business of being an artist, seem effortlessly straightforward. "I'm a beginner, when it comes to contemporary art," she says rather disarmingly when we meet in London. Two years ago her work was on show in both the Yokohama Triennale (where *I/O: Chamber of a Musical Composer* was on display) and the inaugural triennial Sapporo International Art Festival. At the end of last year she won the second Nissan Art Award (for an exceptional work by a Japanese artist). It's as a result of the last that she's currently on a residency at Camden Arts Centre in London. She's recently had a solo exhibition at Project Fulfil Art Space in Taipei, another opening at Jane Lombard Gallery in New York in November. After that, in December, she'll be taking part in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which in turn will be followed by a February solo show at London's White Rainbow. And there's a new project gestating for next year's Sapporo International Art Festival. Not so bad for a beginner.

Indeed, you'd be forgiven for thinking that Mohri's admission is simply a case of stereotypical Japanese humility. It's not. Well, not exactly, given that even back in 2006, when Mohri was still a masters student, her sound installation *vexations* was picking up awards at both the Ars Electronica and Transmediale cultural festivals. But three years ago she was working parttime as a carpenter, and wondering where exactly her life in art was going.

Growing up in Kanagawa, just south of Tokyo, Mohri's original interest had been music: "My hometown doesn't have any good modern art museums," she points out, "we have a really conservative collection: really old-style." While, in art terms, the coastal city is probably still best known for being the location of Hokusai's celebrated woodblock print *The Great Wave* (c. 1830–33), it did host a 2002

solo show by Kosugi Takehisa (who was associated with Fluxus and cofounded Group Ongaku in 1960, going on to become a pioneer of group improvisation and multimedia happenings in Japan), which made Mohri curious about the possibilities of sound art. "It's more comfortable for me", she continues, "doing something with sound or music." So she entered university in Tokyo (first at Tama Art University and then for an MFA at University of the Arts) to study new media art with sound art as a focus and practitioners such as Carsten Nicolai as an inspiration. Although she prefers to call sound art "music without musicians". "I played in a band before," she continues "but I'm really shy. When I was drunk, I could stand up to an audience, but I couldn't continue all the time. I prefer to watch the music, or to feel the atmosphere of a gig." And that, of course, is one of the sensations you experience when watching *I/O: Chamber of a Musical Composer*. Nevertheless, Mohri has kept in contact and collaborated with some of the leading figures in Japan's avant-garde music scene, among them Ryuichi Sakamoto and Yoshihide Otomo.

Even after graduating, Mohri felt a sense of conflict about her interests in music and contemporary art and how they might fit together. "It felt more like there was a war between new media and the contemporary art," she explains, referring not only to her internal sense of oppositions, but also to how sound and media art are viewed by the artworld in general. "I was really a little unsatisfied with life," she continues, with her usual sense of understatement.

"Then, three years ago, some artist friends had suggested that I should really work hard as an artist one day. So I just rented out a studio and then tried to do it my way." She invited some curator friends to come and visit her, and one year later her work was on show in Yokohama and Sapporo. "I just changed my mind," she says

with typical straightforwardness.

In many ways, *I/O: Chamber of a Musical Composer* can be viewed as symbolic of that change inasmuch as it transforms a series of musical objects and the memory of a musician (an objective and subjective relation) into animated sculptural form. The installation also articulates many of the themes that have come to characterise Mohri's artworks since that time: the mix of audible, visible and invisible narratives; an extrinsic randomness that conceals an inherent connectedness; a series of apparently ordinary objects rendered extraordinary (at one point in the work, a pair of table forks are used to trigger an electronic switch); and an interest in a certain type of animism. Beyond that, the work expresses a fundamental interest in the nature of performance, performativity and a creative process that runs from inspiration (even if its visible source is merely the dirt in a room) through to composition and execution.

And if that work seems to undermine many of the great myths of creation in art, Mohri is equally down-to-earth when it comes to describing her own process. "Basically, the important thing is collecting objects randomly," she says, "and then I think about something, or I just start to make something small, then combine everything. For me, that practice is like drawing. So when I get an opportunity, for a group show, or for a solo show, or triennale, biennale, it's good, because they have a theme. Then I start to think about how to fit with the theme."

‘Basically, the important thing is collecting objects randomly, and then I think about something, or I just start to make something small, then combine everything. For me, that practice is like drawing’



above *Circus in the Ground*, 2014, compass, fossil, chime, bell, garden furniture, feather duster, ruler, light, umbrella, gut, motor, light bulb, roll paper, picture (installation view, Sapporo International Art Festival)

preceding pages *I/O: Chamber of a Musical Composer*, 2014, paper, wood, acrylic, dust, blind, fork, organ, drums, wind-bell, toolbox (installation view, Yokohama Triennale)

both images Courtesy the artist and White Rainbow, London



facing page and above *Moré Moré (Leaky): The Waterfall Given #1-3* (detail), 2015, installation. Photo: Keizo Kioku. Courtesy Nissan Art Award 2015





Moré Moré (Leaky): The Waterfall Given #1-3, 2015, wood, umbrella, hose, PET bottles, rubber glove, bucket, wheel, duster, sponge, pump, acrylic resin.
Photo: Keizo Kioku. Courtesy Nissan Art Award 2015

Circus in the Ground (2014), an installation across two sites created for the first Sapporo Art Festival (its theme was ‘City and Nature’), the random objects it comprises include compasses, fossils, a chime, a bell, garden furniture, a feather duster, a ruler, lights, a polka-dot umbrella, an electric fan, lampshades, motors, a roll of paper and a framed picture, all of them drawn from the collection of objects salvaged from around the world that the artist hoards (“I keep so many items all the time, even just a cup”) in rooms in her parent’s house and her own apartment. The bulk of the installation was housed in Seikatei, a wooden structure located in Kairakuen Park – the ancient site of a *memu* (which in the language of Hokkaido’s indigenous Ainu people designates a spring) – in Sapporo that was built in 1880 as a guesthouse for the Meiji Emperor and other distinguished visitors to the city. It is notable for having the external appearance of a Western architecture (Alpine cottage crossed with urban Victorian) and a traditional Japanese interior. And for the way the architecture draws in natural light.

For all that background noise, the experience of viewing Mohri’s installation in the building was of seeing a series of random objects arranged on the floor, and seeing and hearing them equally randomly turning themselves on and off. The work’s title derives from John Cage’s ‘Autobiographical Statement’ of 1990, in which the American artist-composer writes: ‘In Sevilla on a street corner I noticed the multiplicity of simultaneous visual and audible events all going together in one’s experience and producing enjoyment. It was the beginning for me of theater and circus.’ And yet there is more to the work than its replication of the saturated experience of the circus of urban life.

Linked by a series of sensors and connections, beginning with the vibrations of the compass needles, which are arranged in a circle, and continuing through the wind generated by the fan and the light emitted by bulbs, the objects and their behaviour both mimic and explain a natural system governed by light, wind, gravity and magnetic force. In the first three instances these are elemental forces that architecture either resists or adapts. In a far less obvious way, Mohri’s installation articulates a philosophy of the Ainu people (expressed through the construction of their language) that traces the act of sensing to the presence of sound, which comes into being when a circle reverberates – like ripples across a spring. And yet, as much as this work traces the roots of an ancient culture down from the branches of a present one and can be neatly explained to fit with the artist’s stated purpose of adapting her materials to a theme, the

‘Japan is such a shaking island,
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overwhelming experience of it all remains one of a series of random events waiting to be reconciled. Like the dust on the floor waiting to be played. While her art sometimes audibly relies on power, it’s notable for the way in which it quietly undermines any overt potency in the power relationships it describes.

Among her more recent productions, all this has come to a head in *Moré Moré (Leaky): The Waterfall Given #1–3* (2015), the work for which the artist won the Nissan Award. It consists of three large wooden frames that clearly evoke Marcel Duchamp’s *The Large Glass* (1915–23). Suspended within them are a plastic bag, a rubber glove, a watering can, a wire basket, ladles, aluminium pots, buckets, lightbulbs, a birdcage and, naturally, a bicycle wheel. All of them deployed to collect and recirculate water introduced by the artist causing a ‘leak’ to appear onsite. The system plays music too, but this time it seems incidental to Mohri: “I didn’t expect it, but every frame has a different sound, like a rainbow hitting an object,” she says.

There’s a sense that this work has marked an overcoming of Mohri’s anxieties about the irreconcilability of music and sound art and the kind of contemporary art practice that is held up as the mainstream by both art institutions and the market. And that overcoming has helped her and her work further embrace a certain contingency: “At first, I was really curious about sound installation,” she continues “but now I’ve switched to liking movement more, or at least not only sound right now. I really like a changing situation or flux situation.”

However *Moré Moré (Leaky): The Waterfall Given #1–3* really begins neither with an awards exhibition, nor an epiphany. Rather its roots lie in an ongoing collection of photographs (*Moré Moré Tokyo*, 2009–) of Tokyo stationmasters’ homemade attempts to patch leaks in the city’s subway stations using found materials such as umbrellas, plastic sheets, hazard tape, pipes and plastic buckets. “Then I realised that Japan is such a shaking island, and even a new metro station has a water leak installation,” Mohri says of her initial discovery of the phenomenon. But more than that, she continues enthusiastically, “It was as if the station employees made some sculptures using the plastic objects. I felt it was really an installation. You know, that art pieces really happen all the time.” ara

Solo shows by Yuko Mohri can be seen at Jane Lombard Gallery, New York, 10 November – 17 December, and White Rainbow, London, in February. Her work is included in the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 12 November – 29 March