

ARTICLE

Email | Print

Yumi Kori: Yumi Kori Builds with Light

by Yasufumi Nakamori

Using the ephemeral and transcendental qualities of light, architect-artist Yumi Kori affects the way we see and feel the world. Her art installations and architecture challenge our conventional sense of space and the relationship of our physical "self" to the space around us.

Having studied architecture both in Japan and the U.S., Kori established the architects' office Studio MYU in Tokyo with her partner Endo Toshiya in 1991. She has since designed many residences and buildings in Japan.

House of Shadows (2002) that she designed in Musashino, on the outskirts of Tokyo, was highly commended and received the prestigious London-based AR Award for Emerging Architecture in 2002. She wrote on this house: "I aspired to 'vanish' architecture by using 'shadows' and 'corridors.' Shadows eclipse the materiality of architecture... Shadows erode architecture." A multitude of shifting shadows in and around the house resonate with Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's influential essay "In Praise of Shadows" (In'ei raisan), which embraces the richness of shadows and the infinite nature of darkness.



Yumi Kori, House of Shadows, 2002

For Kori, light and shadow imply the passage of time, induce human activities, and deconstruct and construct space, as demonstrated in her installation project at Maison Hermès Forum in the commercial district of

Ginza in Tokyo in 2002. The work was titled *Panta rhei*, or "all things are in constant flux," an axiom of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. It simply consisted of eleven tons of gravel named *Shirakawa jari* (the type used at the Zen temple Ryoanji in Kyoto) raked in concentric circles around structural steel columns of the building. The whole scene, reminiscent of the *karesansui*-style sand garden, can be viewed from a wooden deck also created by the artist. The gravel becomes the medium of light and shadow, reflecting the sunlight that enters through the gallery's glass block walls and enabling the viewer to see the changing color of light, as the day goes by. At night, the artificial light of nearby neon signs adds color to the otherwise monochromatic space, which is illuminated by white fluorescent tubes installed beneath the viewing deck.



Yumi Kori, Panta Rhei, 2002

Kori deems light a medium for transcending the measurable world to a sensual, visceral, and subliminal experience. In *Defragmentation/red* (2000), an installation in Prenzlauer Berg, Berlin, Kôri guided the visitor through the dark, concentric, labyrinthine corridors in a 19th-century underground water reservoir by strategically installing vertical red light bars. Sounds composed by sound artist Bernhard Gal and human echoes permeated the space. The light bars were spaced to lure visitors on to explore the tunnel-like passage. The experience was at once disorienting and mesmerizing, as though time had stopped. This installation, which won another AR Award for Emerging Architecture in

2001, and *House of Shadows* marked points of departure for Kori's more

recent light-based installations. Since these projects, she has worked as an artist as much as an architect. Her dual career development, as a female architect in Japan's maledominated architecture world, and simultaneously as an artist, is unique, perhaps made possible by her conscious selection of the U.S. and Europe as her main artistic venues.

The importance of sound in Kori's art derives from the artist's comparison of physical "space" to the "pause" between sounds, both of which are expressed by the Japanese word *ma*. She argues that both architecture and music create space and environment and they have to be experienced over time. For her, in music, the space between sounds is as important as the sound itself, as in architecture, the space between walls is as important as the built work itself. In her installation art, she desires to bring these two types of *ma* into a dialogue and create a hybrid space.



Yumi Kori, Defragmentation/Red, 2000

The installation *Shinkai* (meaning "deep sea") created for *Making a Home* is an example of such hybridity. Kori created the first version of this work for her 2006 solo exhibition at the Ise Cultural Foundation Gallery in New York. Here, the gallery's white cube is transformed into a space filled with tiny red lights which seemingly float in space. A mixture of ambient sounds of the site and water sounds, produced in collaboration with Gal, creates a deep ocean effect. The lights seem like myriad squiggling neon tadpoles suspended in water. In reality, she uses only seven or eight lights, which reflect on the surface of thousands of clear balloons that fill the gallery. Kôri thus invites the audience to physically engage with the otherworldly transformed space and with their own changing reactions within it.

What was your first impression of New York City?

YK: In 1989, after traveling to Europe for three months, I flew from Rome to New York. It was my first visit but I felt I was returning to my hometown. I was very comfortable, and I felt that I would live in New York some day.

Did you have any interactions with other artists or supporters that were especially beneficial to you and your work?

YK: I have found my friendship with artist Phill Niblock the most important.

Phill, who runs the organization called Experimental Intermedia, began his career as a photographer, and now is engaged in sound art and video installation. His work influenced the way I think of the interactive quality of sound and space. In his loft, where he hosts great artists from all over the world, I have met numerous really wonderful artists.

Do you ever regret leaving Japan?

YK: These days, I believe the word "living" has adopted an entirely new meaning. With fast Internet connection, I can "live" in multiple places. While I "live" in New York, I "live" in Japan and other countries. Moreover, since I always work site specifically, I work with the local people and the local place. I feel that I live in the site where I work. For example, last year I "lived" in Switzerland by participating in an artist-in-residence program. I also "lived" in Brazil for the preparation of my art installation. I am constantly traveling: I "live" in the cities I stay in.

Translated by Yasufumi Nakamori

Topics: [Art](#), [Design](#)

RELATED CONTENT

