

# Keeping Space Alive with Light

## Yumi Kori

BY JONATHAN GOODMAN

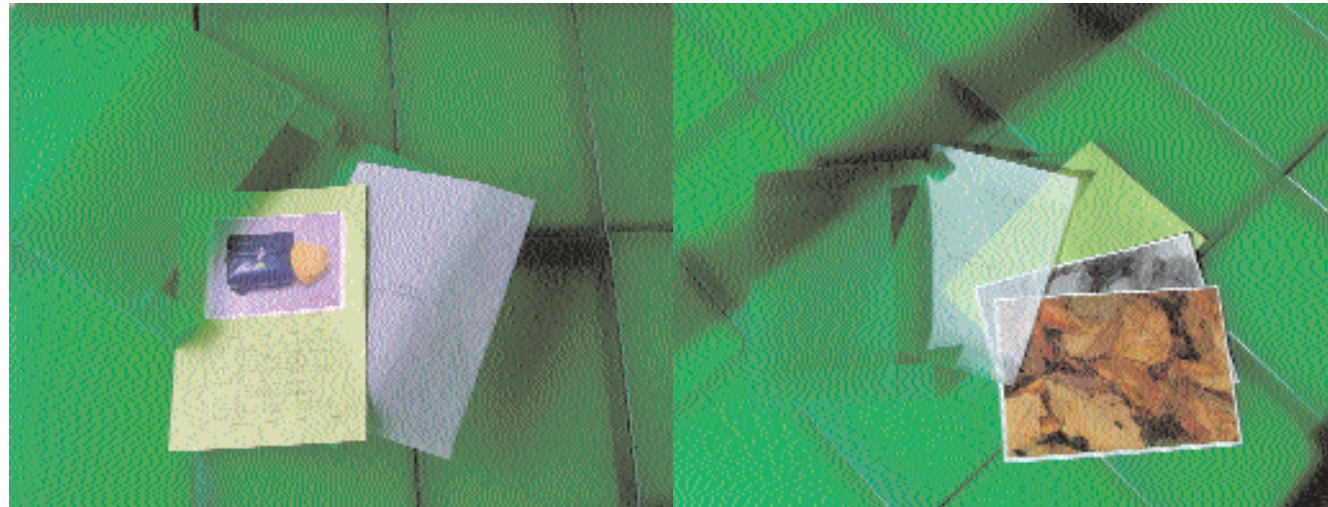
*Green Box*, 2002. Polypropylene paper, fluorescent lamps, room size 3 x 11.4 x 8 meters. Site-specific participatory installation at the Old Musashino Public Library, Tokyo.

In recent years, the relationship between sculpture and architecture has become so close as to effect a merger, a situation more complex than it would initially appear. Richard Serra moves more and more inevitably into the realm of architectural space, giving his sculpture a massiveness of size that translates into work expressing the duration of time—an attribute that we often ascribe to architecture. And Frank Gehry has devoted much of his career to the creation of large sculptural spaces within the vocabulary of architecture. Part of the change in attitude has to do with technological ability: both Serra and Gehry rely on the computer to plan their often extraordinarily complex constructions. But there is also the recognition that contemporary art is most inter-

esting when it embraces space that exists in between categories.

Contemporary art is not satisfied with merely being looked at: it wants to integrate a kind of completeness into its discussion with the viewer, who is cajoled, seduced, or bullied into a feeling nearly overwhelming in its singularity. But large size is not the only way in which sculpture makes its mark on the audience—witness the art of light and space artists James Turrell and Robert Irwin. Turrell creates works that seem to be materially solid in space (when they are not), while Irwin manipulates light in a manner intended to accentuate the relationship between illumination and sensory experience, an exchange resulting from the use of scrim in both indoor and outdoor environments.





As a material, light fills space in ways that are memorable for the viewer. In theory, there is no place it cannot go. It reaches as far as it is allowed to continue and delivers its message seemingly effortlessly, as if it were the means of our most basic interactions. Metaphorically light is used to express understanding (as in the phrase “seeing the light”), and physically it expresses itself in unlimited space, so that the experience of a light installation borders on the infinite. Because light is ineffable, it retains a remarkable ability to express the spiritual, being a language we immediately understand on an intuitive rather than a material basis.

The idea of a complete light environment comes easily to Yumi Kori, a Japanese-born architect active in Japan and New York (she has taught the principles of Japanese architecture at Columbia University). A distinguished architect in her own right, Kori also has been developing a remarkable career as a light and installation artist, with projects all over the world, in such cities as Tokyo, Berlin, Seattle, and New York. Because she was trained as an architect, her art reflects an unusual sensitivity to the interaction between viewers and her created spatial environments. While studying architecture in Japan, Kori also worked intensively with a theater group, which used an abandoned school building as a theater. As part of this collective, Kori wrote scripts, designed stage sets, and created light and sound effects. She says of her experience: “I was fascinated by the

idea that I could change a limited space into a variety of environments by using sound, lights, spatial settings, and actors’ movements.” To this day, sound is integral to many of her projects; she collaborates with Bernhard Gal, a Vienna/Berlin-based composer and sound artist who has contributed ambient sound environments to several of her installations.

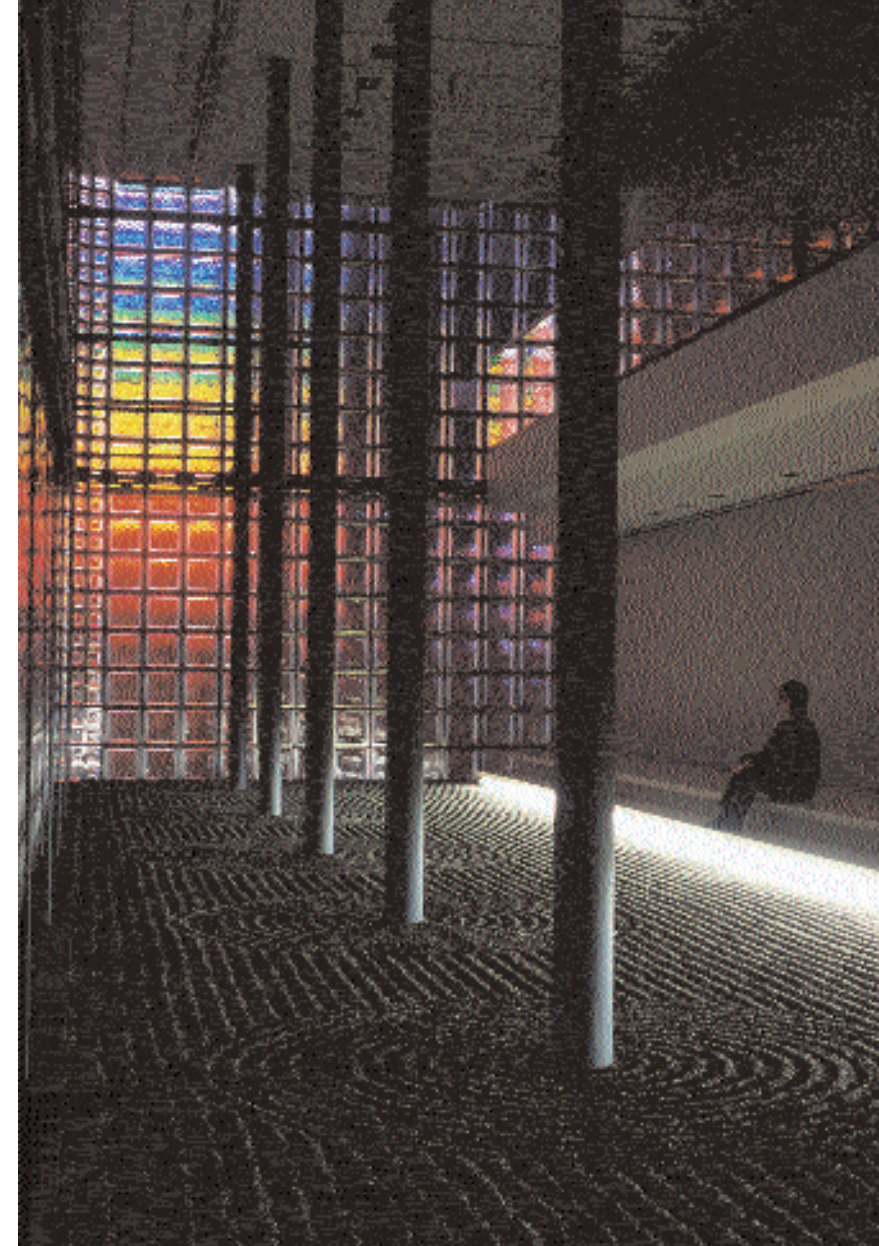
Kori graduated from Kyoto Prefecture University in 1983 and began working as an assistant architect in a small architecture firm in Tokyo. In 1991, she established the firm Studio MYU. Her practice has helped her understand that architecture has a strong effect on spatial and temporal perception: “In architecture, people feel space through the body. Architecture invites inhabitants to participate in a unique spatial experience and aesthetic pleasure that affects their feelings and their perception of the world. I create space that seeks to evoke an experience beyond conventional function.” The idea of moving beyond previously understood and accepted ideas of architecture is central to Kori’s aesthetic—she says that her artworks usually lack an exterior structure. Even so, her pieces often explore both interior and exterior space, so that viewers are invited to enter the piece and discover the idiosyncrasies of the installation and its effects on the audience: “Visiting the spaces I have created affects the viewer’s perception through vision, sound, touch, and movement. Thus the spaces provide a unique sensory experience, just as my

**Two details from *Green Box*, 2002. Site-specific participatory installation in which people were invited to contribute their stories to a green box and place it in the Old Musashino Public Library, Tokyo.**

architectural projects do.” Kori sees art and architecture existing in a seamless interaction. Both are understood to envelop the viewer/participant; in much of her work, the viewer is expected to engage in a totalizing experience.

Asked to compare architecture with her installation, Kori says: “Architecture is by nature a site-specific installation. It cannot ignore the geography, climate, and cultural context of the land. By the installation of architecture, the site is transformed into a new environment. Thus it provides a new spatial experience for its inhabitants. By the same measure, most of my artworks are site-specific. I create artworks by installing elements in an existing site; through the installation, the site is transformed into a new environment. My intervention reframes the reality of the site and changes the inhabitants’ spatial perception. Invisible elements in the site become visible; other visible elements become invisible. Consequently, visitors/inhabitants to my art installation are invited to explore a new space. My installation art is thus a kind of architecture.”

Kori’s quality as an artist comes through in her merger of site and experience: the viewer has no choice but to accept and move through her site-specific installations.



**Left and detail: *Panta Rhei*, 2002. 11 tons of gravel, pine flooring, and fluorescent lamps, 6.75 x 43 x 6.8 meters. Site-specific installation at the Maison Hermès, Tokyo.**

the site, where it was raked into patterns, with the regularly spaced poles serving as points of interest in the same way as the rocks in a Zen garden.

Visitors were encouraged to take off their shoes and meditate on the pine floor, so that the site served as a meditative environment in which outside influences, in the form of neon lights and ambient traffic sounds, made their impact on the sitting quietly viewer. Placed within the piece, the audience became part of its flow. By quoting Heraclitus in her title, Kori brought an element of internationalism into the conception of her work, which beautifully embraced the collective space of the gallery. One does well to remember that Kori is interested in both Western and Eastern ways of seeing, in highlighting the international imagination of her aesthetic, even when the elements of *Panta Rhei* seem deliberately Japanese in nature.

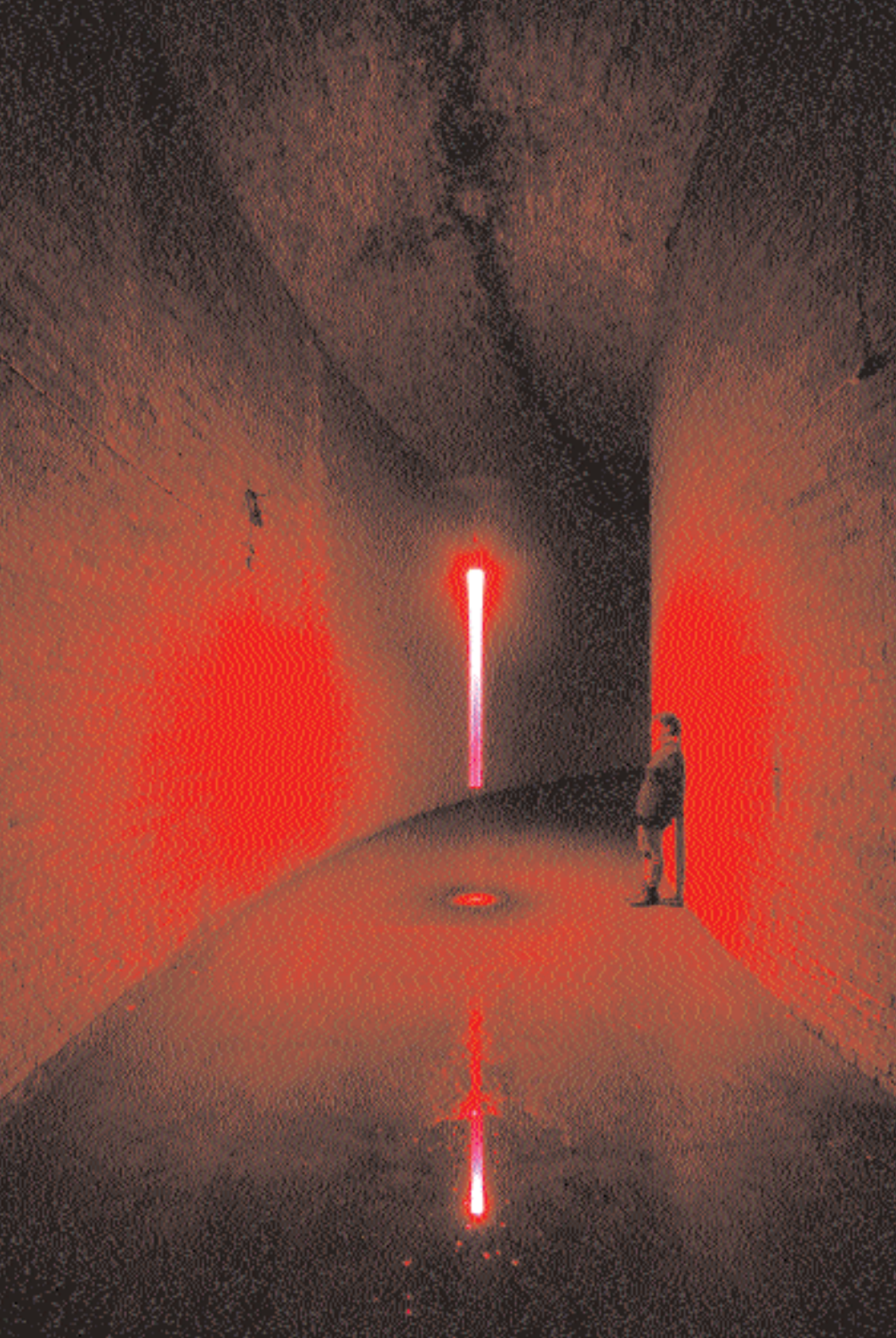
*Green Library* (2002), a site-specific, interactive installation at the empty Musashino Public Library in Tokyo, was particularly interesting in its choice of venue. The library was closed in 1986, and all of

This space is close to architecture, but, at the same time, the artworks often put the viewer on the track of a boundless sense of self, filling the installational space without limits, much like light. There is a conversion of methodologies in Kori’s art, in which the viewer acts as a kind of zenith of awareness within a given architectural and installational space. The effect is contemplative, reflecting Kori’s study of yoga and meditation in India in 1986, when her appreciation of meditative culture culminated in her sitting for a month for 14 hours a day in a windowless three-by-seven-foot cell. She says that during her time sitting, “the vibration of my body became one with the atmosphere; my body dissolved into the air and became transparent.” Interested in exposing not only herself but her audience to forms of experience

that go beyond the norm, Kori seeks a mystical structure to free viewers from everyday life.

One can see this best in her remarkable light and space projects, which offer a contemplative space. In 2002, at the gallery space in the Maison Hermès in Tokyo, Kori created the striking installation *Panta Rhei*, which means “everything in flux” in classical Greek. Backing the narrow raked gravel (the stone was the same kind used for the stone garden at Ryoan-ji Temple in Kyoto), which was broken up at regular intervals by poles, were sunlight-transmitting glass cubes and artificial illumination from the neon lights outside the space’s glass-block wall. In *Panta Rhei*, architecture and art became one; the primary idea was to visualize time through light and shadow. Kori had some 11 tons of gravel transported to





*Defragmentation/red*, 2000. Hand-scraped acrylic tubes, reflector lamps, water, and speakers, 7.7 x 40 meters diameter. Sound by Bernhard Gal. Site-specific installation at the Prenzlauer Berg Water Reservoir, Berlin.

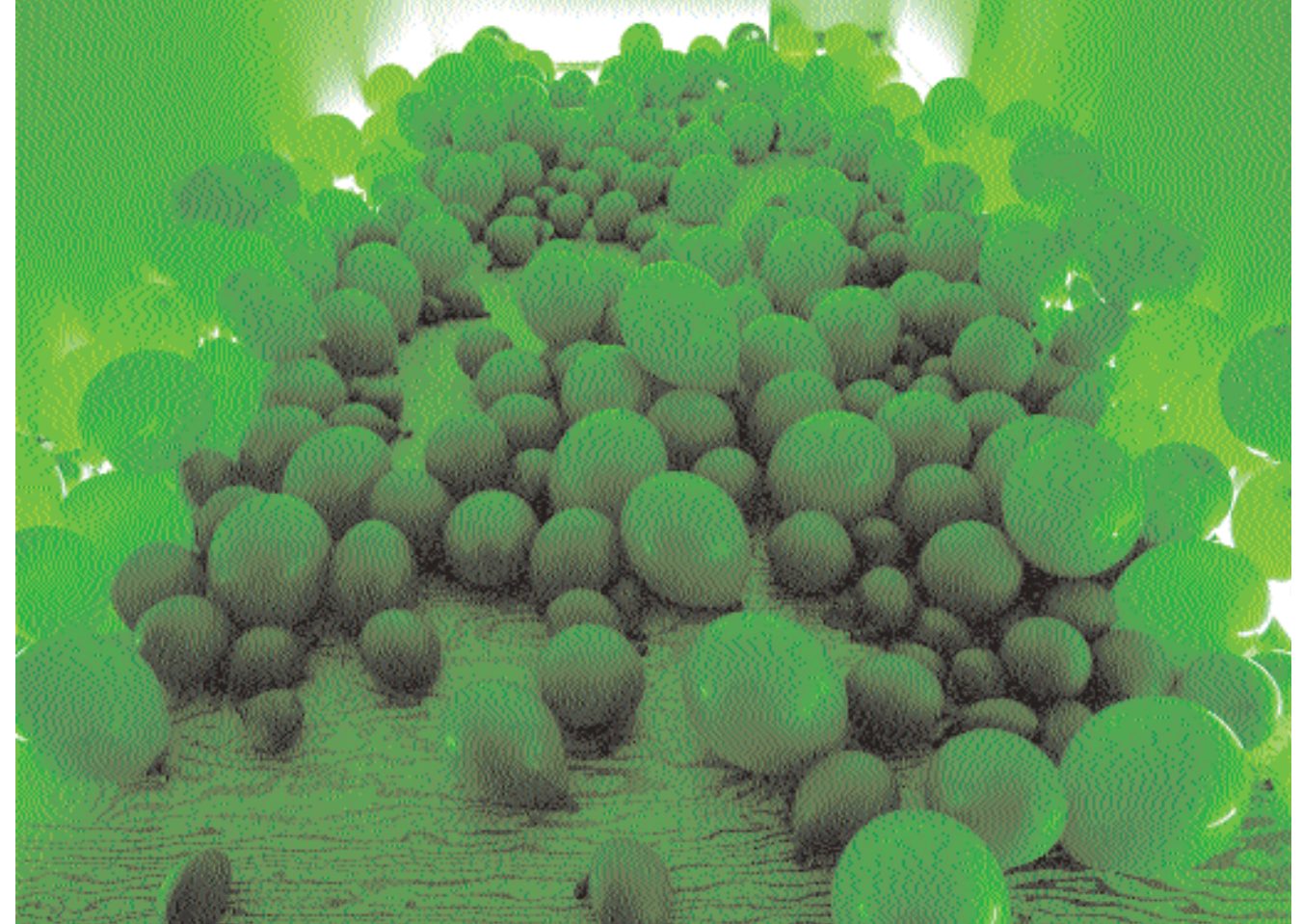
stories, not only the old ones written by authors no longer present, but also other stories brought to the library by the visitors themselves. Her awareness of the interactive nature of libraries was central to the experience of the piece. *Green Library* was a social sculpture in the Beuysian sense: the interaction of people and imagination, given physical reality within a public space, resulted in a project of remarkable dignity.

One of Kori's most beautiful works is the slightly earlier installation *Defragmentation/red* (2000), whose site in Berlin was an underground reservoir first built in 1874 and used to collect water until 1914. It was used as a prison during World War II, after which it became an air-raid shelter and, eventually, a ruin. The project consisted of red light columns installed at equidistant intervals inside the space, which is made up of concentric rings. The idea was that the visitor would wander through the space, moving from one column of light to the next, the space before and after lit mysteriously, encouraging a meditative approach to traversing the water reservoir. As one moved through the circular corridor, the glowing columns were successively revealed, the concentric circular paths forming an infinite effect meant to create an equally infinite awareness in the visitor. To complete the sense of a mysterious, resonant space, a bit of water covered the floors, enhancing the reflection of the light. At the same time, a 60-minute tape consisting of a continuous, static, time-distorting fabric of sound by collaborator Gal accompanied the environment. The music was spare and minimal, in keeping with the installation's quiet usurpation of space. Music was of equal merit in this work. As Kori points out, "Music and architecture are very similar. Both create space and an environment; both have to be experienced over time. In music, the space between sounds is as important as the sound itself. In architecture, the space between columns or walls is as important

WERNER ZELIEN

the books were moved to a new space. As Kori points out, the library had been empty since that time and was scheduled to be demolished, but it nevertheless contained memories of the books it had stored and of its patrons' stories. During the exhibition period, a light installation transformed the reading room into a large green box. One thousand small green boxes were distributed to the public, asking viewers to turn in stories based on questions and directions such as, "Tell me about your first love" and

"When you were young, what did you want to be when you grew up?" and "Tell me about something new that you want to start." Visitors took the boxes home with them, returning them to the reading room with their own stories now added to the previous narratives. Other visitors were encouraged to pick up a new box from the back room of the installation and respond to its question, after which they installed it on the floor of the reading room. Kori recognizes the library as a place to exchange



*Green Balloon*, 2004–05. Seamless fluorescent lamps, electric fans, and balloons, 3 x 8 x 4 meters. Participatory installation at the Phatory Gallery, New York.

as the actual architectural materials themselves. In my work, I want to bring these two kinds of notions of space into dialogue; I wanted to create a hybrid space that was woven from sound and physical material."

Kori's art usually does not engage the viewer in a historical sense; rather, it culminates in experiences intended to emphasize the mystical feeling of light and its effect on surrounding space. Her sense of architecture is offset by her emphasis on meditation. As she comments, "In the state of contemplative mind, people absorb reality through all their senses." Just as architecture hopes to provide a complete sensory experience for the viewer, so does the mystical bent of Kori's work attempt a holistic world, encompassing the visitor's body and mind. In *Defragmentation/red*, the light columns, according to the artist, were used as a device to keep people moving forward—as they moved into the dark, they gradually moved into the red-lit, shadowed space before them. They began by walking

MATTEO AMES

toward the light and as they passed by, discovered the lights successively. Kori cites the idea of cyclical time as central to her understanding of art. She compares the experience to that of traveling on an airplane or in a desert: time does not progress in a linear fashion, yet it moves nonetheless. Such a notion creates an exquisite awareness of time as well as movement through space, in ways that heighten the viewer's involvement in the environment.

Kori is attracted to a totality of vision, one created by the similar yet competing concepts of light and sound in space. In her architecture as well as her installations, she is determined to build a transcendent space, one that involves her audience on all levels. Kori recently constructed *Green Balloon* (2004–05) in New York. The installation consisted of green balloons, lit with a green light and filled with the breath—an intimate part of the body—of participants at Phatory Gallery in New York's Lower East Side. To reach her audience, Kori distributed 1,000 *Green Balloon* installation cards, each accompanied by a balloon, inviting people to take part in the piece by blowing up a balloon and instilling it with a particular thought. As more and

more people returned the balloons to the gallery, the installation grew larger, gathering force as the number of balloons increased. For the closing party, visitors were invited to deflate the balloons, emptying them of breath and thought.

Kori is an unusual artist, someone devoted to the mysteries of light and space. Her projects begin as architecture or installation but then develop into moving experiments intended to explore the ability of light to create experience beyond that of everyday living. It is fair to say that she has a strong mystical bent. The sense of the unknown is important to her, and she strives to communicate a similar sense of passion, involvement, and enigma to her audience. Light is by itself so powerful a metaphor for the creation of a positive spiritual space that we can read it only as an assertion of the spiritual will, something Kori has in abundance. Making so much from so little requires determination and skill. We are made larger by her inspired projects, which change, as we do, over time.

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