

## The path to a collective spirituality in the art of Mori Mariko

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Among the most successful Japanese artists working internationally, Mori Mariko (b. 1967, Tokyo) has distinguished herself on the contemporary art scene for her multi-disciplinary practice that continuously experiments with different techniques and concepts. During her very active career, and particularly around the turn of the century, a shift can be noticed from the rather pop imagery of her earlier works to an exploration of religious, sacred, and spiritual themes, a progressive transformation that has developed in multiple directions until the present moment. The references included in her artworks often merge indigenous religions, Shinto, and Buddhism, doctrines that she perceives as ways to reflect on broader aspects of life, nature, and the humankind at large.

This article traces an overview of some of the most important works realized by Mori during the past three decades, which are grouped both thematically and chronologically: the early photographs and performances; the pieces inspired by Tantric Buddhism, with strong connections to traditional Buddhist art; the big-scale installations, with a shift towards sacred architecture; the projects encouraging the interconnectedness between different people, as well as a rediscovery of their roots; and finally, the outdoor installations that celebrate nature and Earth.

**Key words:** Mariko Mori, contemporary art, Buddhism, art installation, architecture, site-specific installation, photography, videoart, performance

### 1. Introduction

Mori Mariko 森万里子 (1967) is a multi-disciplinary artist born in Japan and based between Tokyo, New York and London, and has an over 30-years career in the visual arts. She has always been very active on the national and international scene and is one of the most successful contemporary artists from Japan; her works have been exhibited in solo and collective exhibitions all over the world during the years, receiving global attention and several prestigious awards and prizes (Matsui 2010: 190). Mori has made wide use of photography and performance in her works, particularly during the first years of her career. As her art developed, however, she progressively abandoned the photographic medium to embrace a more diversified practice that includes sculpture, installation and sometimes painting.

Performance has also maintained a role in her production, shifting from being the central subject of the images, to become a specific act that accompanies and enriches some of the most recent projects.

The artist is widely renowned in particular for the pop imagery of her early works. Rarely, however, studies have focused on the multi-layered sacred and religious references of her art. Through this paper, I am aiming to shed light specifically on this rather unexplored side of her production: by selecting some of the most significant and spiritually charged works realized in the past 25 years, this study will inspect the presence of recurring otherworldly elements in Mori's art. These are of syncretic nature: they often refer to indigenous religions, Shinto, and in particular Buddhism, whose doctrines have strongly influenced her main body of work as ways to encourage further reflections on life, nature, cosmos, and more in general a globally shared balance between all the living beings.

The artworks are grouped into different sections that combine them from both a chronological and thematic perspective: a brief outline of her early photography and the progressive shift to religious themes; the artworks inspired by Tantric Buddhism, where the main body of work also shows several references to traditional Buddhist art; the development of immersive installations as a way to explore sacred venues and architecture; the projects where art and technology merge to create a shared experience between people and their collective history; and finally, the outdoor installations to celebrate the environment.

It is important to highlight that the present overview is not to be intended as a complete account of all the works realized by Mori during her very active career so far: many more should be included in order to have a completely exhaustive record of her production. This is rather a selection of projects that can be considered among the most striking examples of her unique combination of religious topics, traditions, art and technology. As we will see, for Mori, art is a shared language that can communicate with everybody in a collective experience.

## 2. Women from another dimension: performances, *Beginning of the End*, *Miko no Inori*

Mori Mariko was born in 1967 in Tokyo, where she initially specialized in fashion design by attending the Bunka Fashion College (*Bunka Fukusou Gakuin* 文化服装学院). In 1988, keen to pursue a career in the arts, she moved to London where she attended the Byam Shaw School of Art and, from the following year, the Chelsea College of Art. In 1992 she moved to New York, where she took part in the Independent Study Program at Whitney Museum of American Art. The artist is still based between Japan, Europe and US nowadays, and the mix of stimuli she received from these different cultural milieus have been extremely important in developing her unique artistic language. During her studies,

she was also working as a model for fashion photographers and was included in several Japanese magazines during mid- and late Eighties (Holland 2011: 4). The modeling experience, according to Mori, has been crucial in shaping her relationship with the use of self-portrait and performance (Nicholson 2006: 43). The artist personally designed the garments for all her future works: she believes that the clothes are the skin of an individual and are also a powerful way to express her own identity and ideas (Celant and Mori 1999, para. 13). These elements will often recur in her artworks, such as the 1994-95 performances, which were taking place in different locations of Tokyo.

The protagonist of these acts (and of the subsequent photographs) is Mori herself, who uses her own body in order to metaphorically represent all women who are oppressed, alienated, or in a condition of social inferiority due to reasons connected to gender or class. These topics can be noticed also in other artists on the Japanese scene at the time, who encouraged a reflection on the social contradictions of their country in the post-Bubble era (Matsui 2007: 69). With a great variety of meanings, the works Mori realized in this period merge reality and virtual modification, as well as the use of make-up and disguise; these created different characters that, for their peculiar outlooks, stand out from their surroundings. For instance, the woman represented in the series *Tea Ceremony*, serving tea to male colleagues and other businessmen, shows an alien-like silver suite under the employee uniform, an outlook with different layers (Fritsch 2011: 180). This connotes her as a non-human (or de-humanized) being that cannot be integrated within the surrounding environment. Two other examples of this trend are the photographs *Subway* and *Warrior*: the first one depicts Mori, dressed up as a cyborg, travelling in a carriage of the underground of Tokyo, a familiar environment for whoever traveled at least once in the Japanese city. The scene takes place among common people in their daily routine, thus emphasizing the sensation that Mori's illusory figure simply appeared there from another world. A similar atmosphere can be noticed in *Warrior*, set in a game center, where Mori is depicted as a heroine of a video game, ready to shoot with her weapon, the only woman in a venue dominated by men. This could arguably suggest to the viewer the idea that the woman needs to arm herself to resist the social pressures by which she is overwhelmed.



Figure 1. Mariko Mori, *Tea Ceremony I*. 1994. Cibachrome print. Courtesy the Artist.



Figure 2. Mariko Mori, *Subway*. 1994. Fuji super gloss print. Courtesy the Artist.



Figure 3. Mariko Mori, *Warrior*. 1994. Fuji super gloss print. Courtesy the Artist.

These few examples of Mori's photographic work from the mid-Nineties are crucial in understanding the beginnings of her art, as well as her interest in exploring alternative realities that will be developed even further in the future years. In the photographs of this period, Mori selects common scenes of the everyday life and subverts the order of things by adding the apparition of a surreal element, embodied by her own figure, that makes the viewer doubt the truthfulness of the images. In the wake of these concepts, another important body of work that the artist started in these years – but will be completed only a decade later – is *Beginning of the End* (1995–2006). The series is composed by several pictures taken with a wide-angle lens in different iconic landscapes of the globe: Shibuya in Tokyo, Times Square in New York City, or Piccadilly Circus in London, just to mention a few; but also, historical sites such as the pyramids of Giza in Egypt or the Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia. At the center of all these images we can notice the presence of the artist, once again in a surreal apparition: she lies down in a transparent capsule with her eyes closed, dressed in a body suite that covers her entirely, except for her face – emotionless and indifferent to the passing of time around her. Has she passed away? Or is she resting for a future rebirth instead? The stillness embodied by the central figure in these images seems to overcome the idea of time itself, which is also reaffirmed by the different locations, alternating ancestral and futuristic environments, which suggest an overlapping of past, present and

future. Time and space are therefore not linear, but cyclical, and this connects Mori's work directly to the Buddhist doctrine, which she inspects much more in depth in her following works.



Figure 4. Mariko Mori, *Beginning of the End - Shibuya*. 1995. Cibachrome print. Courtesy the Artist.

Observing Mori's art projects from 1996 onwards, after she started *Beginning of the End*, one can easily trace a progressive detachment from pragmatic issues of society, embodied in Mori's first performances, in favor of a complete transformation of her subjects. The artist began to inspect themes connected with religion and spirituality in her art, thus translating her own reflections on life and death into images. Referring in particular to Buddhism and Shintoism, two of the main cults in Japan, the elements of the artworks from the late Nineties onwards also embody Mori's intention to rethink some of the main pillars of her culture of origin. Multiple interpretations of this radical shift have been postulated by critics during the years, including the theory suggested by Fouser (1998), who argued that the artist in her mid-Nineties photographs intentionally wanted to depict a civilization undergoing a moral decline, in such a way as to create a sort of visual *mappō* 末法 – the decadent phase of decline of Buddha's Law; this was to be followed by the renewed spirituality of the subsequent artworks from 1996 onwards (Fouser 1998: 35). Moreover, it can be noticed that the medium used becomes more complex: the 'religious' pieces are not only photographs and static images, but start becoming more and more dynamic through the use of video and installations that engage with the viewer. The artist can count on equips of engineers and designers to realize her ambitious projects: everything is connected – art and science are not two opposing poles but are, in fact, closely entwined.

The work that marks the passage to the new phase is her first video *Miko no Inori* 巫女の祈り (The Shaman-girl's Prayer, 1996), described by the artist as 'the first work I made after the transition from earthly to heavenly themes' (Hayward 2007: sec. *Miko no Inori*, para. 1). The performance is set in Osaka's Kansai airport, which was completed that year revealing a futuristic architecture, thus becoming a symbol for high technology. In the video the artist, dressed in a plastic-coated white suit, performs an unknown ritual in which she caresses and jiggles a crystal ball. Her composure and concentration seem

to isolate her completely from the surrounding environment. The musical background completes the scene with a sort of lullaby, or rather a prayer, recorded by the artist herself. The continue repetition of the song contributes to generate in the viewer a sense of meditation and make the performer become a sort of futuristic shamanness, guiding the beholder through a collective prayer. In the past, the work has been exhibited in installations that reproduced it on different screens at the same time, thus reverberating the idea of a multiple ritual.

*Miko no Inori* starts defining two of the main topics that will recur in Mori's art from this moment on: the sacred and the hyper-technologic, where the latter is seen as an instrument that can help humanity reach spirituality. The title of the work also holds a direct reference to shamanism, i.e., the word *miko* 巫女, a term that refers to a specific kind of medium of the Japanese tradition. The *miko* is a very ancient female figure who operated within the Shinto shrines and had the ability to invoke the deities through certain rituals and tools and who 'in a state of dissociated trance [is] capable of communicating directly with spiritual beings' (Blacker 1975: 21). Typically using a set of tools composed of a mirror, some arrows, and a bow, these figures become a bridge between the human and the spiritual world, as they were appointed the task to convey the words of the deities and the deceased to men.



Figure 5. Mariko Mori, *Miko no Inori*. 1996. Still from video. Courtesy the Artist.

The shamanness performed rituals during which she would enter a status of extreme trance in order to establish a contact with the spirit. It is interesting to notice that the shamanic practices in Japan are traditionally entrusted to women. As reported by Kawamura (2003), different kinds of *miko* have been identified, according to the different regional areas or the tasks and powers they were assigned: to provide a few examples, the *jinja miko* 神社巫女 (temple *miko*), the women employed in the shrines, with no particular powers; or the *kuchiyose miko* 口寄せ巫女, *miko* who practiced *kuchiyose* – a ritual during which the spirit enters the body of the woman and speaks through her voice (Kawamura 2003: 258).

From this moment onwards, Mori will often portray herself as a shaman, the bridge between the human and the spiritual world, or as a being with divine powers. She repeatedly embodies the role of spiritual guide, trying to convey to others her own idea of spirituality that sees all human being connected in a cosmic vision. This idea is explained by the artist in the following year, on the occasion of the 47<sup>th</sup> Venice Art Biennale, where she presented the video installation *Nirvana* (that will be explained later in this article) among other works,

All living beings are connected at every moment in inner space. Every life form with its own life cycle is part of the outer universe and there is only one planet earth. In the next millennium, the power and the energy of the human spirit should unify the world in peace and harmony without any cultural or national borders.

Because of the immense evolution of science and technology in this century, human beings have often been under the illusion that they can create nature in the place of God (Mori 1997: 424).

The technologic progress, then, should not make the humankind forget its true nature. In line with this concept, *Miko no Inori*'s futuristic shaman makes her appearance in a high-tech environment, and her presence seems to suspend the passing of time; similarly, the hyper-tech location loses its function, as the gestures performed by Mori have nothing in common with the original purpose of the airport's space. In doing so, Mori encourages the viewers to isolate from their surroundings and to meditate, and seems to suggest that even in the most hectic place it is possible to find a connection with one's own inner reality.



### 3. The universe of Buddha in *Nirvana* and *Esoteric Cosmos*

The years 1996 and 1997 represent a moment of intense research for Mori, who creates two works that are strongly connected: the video installation *Nirvana* (1996-97) and the photographic series *Esoteric Cosmos* (1996-98), of which we will see in particular the pieces *Burning Desire* and *Pure Land*.

The video *Nirvana* is composed by a sequence of digitally manipulated, three-dimensional frames, and is one of the main examples of the spiritual research that Mori was developing at the time. As the title suggests, the work is based on the Buddhist concept of nirvana. According to the doctrine, all living creatures are part of a continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth; after dying, every being will reincarnate as a different creature, which can be at a lower or higher level according to the actions accomplished in the previous life. In order to aim for the superior realms, the person must fully commit to a disciplined behavior in life (Becker 1993: 2). Thus the present existence is only one of the many lives that every individual will come across on the path towards salvation. It is important to note, moreover, that the unavoidable element that characterizes the whole cycle is pain, to which even the highest beings are connected. Suffering is an intrinsic part of life, and therefore the individual should ultimately aim to escape the cycle in order to suspend the pain at once: *nirvana* (Becker 1993: 24).

This is Mori's starting point for her video. The artist stated that, in order to come closer to the concept, she changed her whole conduct in order to fully embrace the Buddhist behaviour. In her words,

Over a one-year period, from 1996 to 1997, while I was making this work, I lived an intently ascetic life. I thought that unless I changed my way of life, *Nirvana*, which is the state of ultimate enlightenment, would have no significance, becoming a mere conceptual game (Hayward 2007: sec. *Nirvana*, para. 1).



Figure 6. Mariko Mori, *Nirvana*. 1996-97. Still from video. Courtesy the Artist.

The nirvana depicted by the artist is a completely natural landscape, where a large body of water extends as far as the eye can see. All elements in the image are dominated by pink, yellow and orange nuances, even the sea and the sky that occupy the entire scene. At the center, an event takes place: a figure – Mori – is born from Earth and performs a ritual, standing on a lotus flower, and at some point she is surrounded by alien beings of different colors and vaguely anthropomorphic features. Many references to the Buddhist iconography are included in the piece, as a result of Mori's research conducted on the topic. She stated,

As part of the production work, I traveled to Tibet, where I discovered mandalas. Upon my return to Japan, I researched Japanese mandalas and learned about the Diamond World Mandala (Kongōkai; Sanskrit Vajra-dhatu) and the Womb World (Taizōkai; Sanskrit Garbha-dhatu) Mandala. I became especially interested in the Womb World Mandala, which depicts many Buddhas making various mudra. I selected certain hand gestures and further researched them. [...] The hand gestures I performed in *Nirvana* derived from my research, but their order in my performance was my own (Hayward 2007: sec. *Nirvana*, para. 1).

As we understand from her words, the two pictorial *mandalas* called *Kongōkai* 金剛界 and *Taizōkai* 胎藏界 were crucial for Mori and became the starting point for *Nirvana*. These *mandalas* were recurrent subjects in Japanese art from the Heian period 平安時代 (794-1192 AD) and were widely used as a representation of the spiritual universe, which included the Buddha and his *bodhisattvas*, the sacred individuals that are helping the other beings on their path to enlightenment (Mason 2005: 122-128). The *mandalas* are used mainly by the Shingon school, or *Shingonshū* 真言宗 ('True Word' School), one of the most important and ancient Buddhist schools in Japan. The *mandalas* are considered important worship objects as they help the devoted understanding the multiple manifestations of Buddha and what they represented. Two renowned examples of these are the IX-century silk scrolls of *Kongōkai* and *Taizōkai* in the *Tōji* 東寺 temple in Kyoto, which are considered the most ancient *mandala* paintings in Japan (Mason 2005: 128).

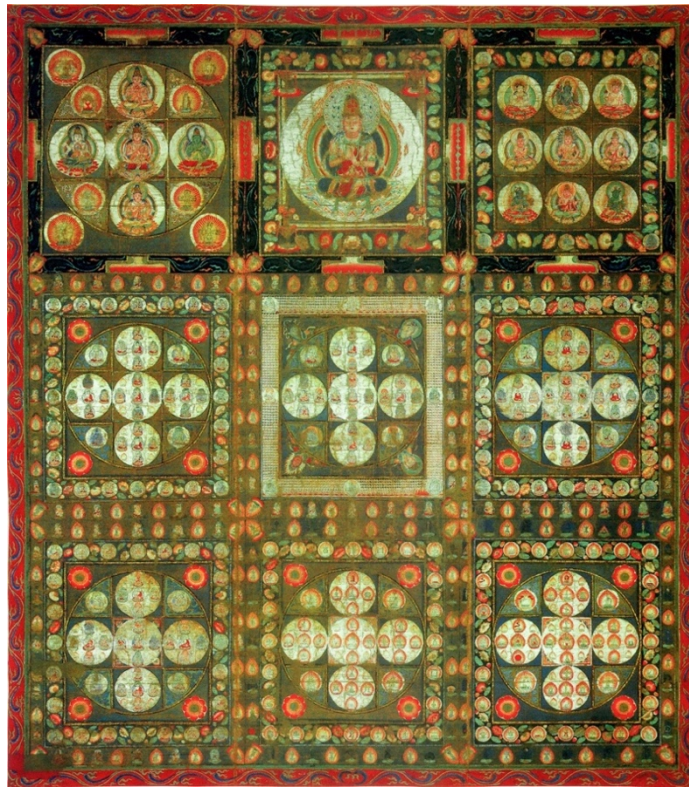


Figure 7. Unknown artist, *Kongōkai mandala*. Kyōogokuji, Tōji, Kyoto. 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the IX century.  
Paint on silk.



Figure 8. Unknown artist, *Taizōkai mandala*. Kyōogokuji, Tōji, Kyoto. 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the IX century.  
Paint on silk.



Figure 9. Unknown artist, *Triptych of White-robed Kannon, Kanzan, and Jittoku* (detail), XIV century. Ink on silk. Mary and Cheney Cowles Collection, Gift of Mary and Cheney Cowles, 2018. The Metropolitan Museum, New York. The Met Collection Open Access.

Another important element in Mori's *Nirvana* that connects the work with the Buddhist tradition is the lotus flower on which the figure stands. It is directly linked to the Lotus Sutra, a sacred text that is central for many Buddhist doctrines, both ancient and modern. The flower becomes the symbol of Buddha himself: for instance, Dainichi Nyorai 大日如来 – considered the primordial Buddha from whom everything is emanated – in the *Taizōkai mandala* usually sits at the center of an eight-petals lotus (Tsuji 2019: 102; Vesco 2021: 364). An iconographic connection with Mori's image might seem evident; it can be argued, however, that the character of the video *Nirvana* is not a representation of Buddha, but rather a Bodhisattva; indeed, the flower on which Mori performs her ritual has just blossomed, an important detail if we consider that the lotus blossom is traditionally among the symbols of bodhisattva Kannon, also called 'Bodhisattva of Compassion,' one of the most worshipped of the Japanese Buddhist tradition. Moreover, in the late medieval period, Kannon has been frequently pictured with soft and

sometimes feminine features (Mason 2005: 73-74). Referring to the later photograph *Pure Land*, which is so directly connected to *Nirvana* to almost look like a frame from the video, Mori also mentioned another goddess of Buddhist worship as one of the references for the central character: Kichijōten 吉祥天, which will be discussed more in detail later in the article (Hayward 2007: sec. *Pure Land*, para. 1; Fritsch 2011: 229).

Mori has also highlighted the importance of *mudra* in creating *Nirvana*, the symbolic positions of the hands that are a fundamental part of the physical practices that help meditation according to Shingon tradition (Yamasaki 1988: 112-113). In the video, Mori personally reinvents this additional element in an original, contemporary perspective.

Considering all the above, it is worth noticing that *Nirvana* is an artwork that can be read and understood on multiple levels, and that can be appreciated even by the viewer who ignores its Buddhist references. When the work was presented at the Venice Biennale in 1997, the international critics tended to indulge on a certain cliché by insisting on the ‘oriental traditions’ combined with popular culture and fashion (Steilhaug 1997: 468). This was a rather simplistic analysis of the piece that didn’t really consider the research behind its realization. Still, *Nirvana* was appreciated by the general public, who understood it as a suggestion to reconsider their own spirituality and their inner reality. The appreciation is also demonstrated by the fact that the piece received the special mention at the same Biennale (Poletto 2008: 347). Indeed, a crucial feature of the piece is its universality: despite its Buddhist roots, *Nirvana* has a strong effect on the viewer even if the religious references are not fully acknowledged. On this point Yuko Hasegawa (2002) also added that, despite the general artifice that characterizes the work, *Nirvana* represents a sacred figure that goes beyond the national boundaries and assumes the role of a global deity (Hasegawa 2002: 135-136).

Besides *Nirvana*, the reflection on the *mandala* iconology led Mori to create the series *Esoteric Cosmos*, therefore continuing to realize artworks that have a common origin in tantric Buddhism. *Esoteric Cosmos* is a series of four large photographs realized between 1996-1998. Each image has its own title: *Entropy of Love*, *Burning Desire*, *Mirror of Water* and *Pure Land*. Together, these photographs create a cycle that connects directly to the idea of universe portrayed in the *mandala*. According to the Shingon doctrine, all the phenomena that take place in the cosmos, including Buddha and the human beings, are generated by the interaction of the natural elements, which create all things by uniting and breaking apart (Tollini 2009: 40-41). The *Esoteric Cosmos* represent each element: as explained by Mori, ‘Wind is generated from emptiness, wind causes fire, fire causes water, water causes earth and earth decays to emptiness. This circulation also represents the Buddhist path of conception, practice, enlightenment and Nirvana’ (Hayward 2007: sec. *Esoteric Cosmos*, para. 1). We will see more in depth two

photographs of this group: *Burning Desire* and *Pure Land*, which might be considered to have the strongest link with each other, as the first seems to be presenting the correct practice to achieve enlightenment through meditation, and the latter can be seen as the outcome of this process.

The piece *Burning Desire* is set in a passage between the rocks of Bajanzag (Flaming Cliffs), in the Gobi Desert, one of the areas with the highest temperatures on the planet (Hayward 2007: sec. *Burning Desire*, para. 1). As mentioned above, the image is a representation of the Buddhist practice, with five characters in meditation, all played by Mori. The figure at the center sits with crossed legs inside a rainbow sphere and is a symbol of the individual who has achieved enlightenment; on the sides, in a symmetrical arrangement, we can notice the other four practitioners, each of them sitting in meditation and surrounded by burning flames that are made clearer by the title of the work. The fire depicted in the photograph is a key element for Buddhist iconography: it suggests that the individuals' earthly passions are not completely extinct and, therefore, these praying figures have not reached Buddhahood yet. It is to be noted, indeed, that in Buddhist doctrine the achievement of Nirvana has often been referred to as the extinguishment of a fire, which becomes the metaphor for all the mundane things that ought to be abandoned on the path to enlightenment (Becker 1993: 24). We can deduce, then, that the character at the center of the image has already escaped the cycle of death-rebirth, and for this reason is not among flames. Mori's previous travels to central Asia were crucial to deepen her knowledge on these religious topics and are at the root of this piece from both a spiritual and a practical perspective. Indeed, she explained that during her travels to Tibet, for instance, she personally purchased several tools and fabrics that she used to realize the costumes of this image (Hayward 2007: sec. *Burning Desire*, para. 1).



Figure 10. Mariko Mori, *Burning Desire*. 1996-98. Glass with photographic interlayer. Courtesy the Artist.



Figure 11. Mariko Mori, *Pure Land*. 1996-98. Glass with photographic interlayer. Courtesy the Artist.

*Pure Land* is the final work of the series. It is aesthetically linked to the video *Nirvana*, with which the image shares similar characters, settings and colors. In *Pure Land*, Mori is surrounded by the aliens, all carrying musical instruments and moving towards different directions. As anticipated above, Mori stated that one of the visual references for the female character in *Pure Land* is Kichijōten, the goddess of fertility and abundance, worshipped in particular during the Nara 奈良時代 (710-794 AD) and Heian 平安時代 (794-1192 AD) periods as part of the Buddhist deities. Towards the end of the VIII century, the worship of this goddess became more popular, and she was dedicated several ceremonies during the year that would ensure abundant rains and a rich harvest. Mori had the chance to see a famous representation of this sacred figure, from the late VIII century, in the Yakushiji 薬師寺 temple in Nara. There, Kichijōten is portrayed as an elegant lady from the Chinese court, following the female beauty ideal of the time (Mason 2005: 95-97; Vesco 2021: 358). The goddess in this painting seems to be floating on air, a movement emphasized by the lines of her garments. Similar characteristic can be traced also in Mori's photograph.





Figure 12. Unknown artist, *Portrait of Kichijōten*. Yakushiji, Nara. 771-772. Paint on hemp.

The title of the artwork by Mori, moreover, refers to Pure Land Buddhism, which was introduced from China to Japan during the VI century and had a powerful echo in the country, where it gave origin to several schools – two main examples being *Jōdoshū* 浄土宗 (Pure Land School) and *Jōdoshinshū* 浄土真宗 (True Pure Land School), which developed largely throughout the centuries until the Kamakura period 鎌倉時代 (1185–1333 AD). The expression ‘Pure Land’ that gives the title to this Buddhist doctrine (and to Mori’s artwork) is the name of the heavenly place where the Amida Buddha (*Amida Nyōrai* 阿弥陀如来) would allow the rebirth of the devoted who has followed the correct practice in life. It is characterized by a form of meditation that consists in the continuous repetition of Buddha’s name and, through this, the contemplation of Amida himself. In Japanese this formula is *namu amida butsu* 南無阿彌陀佛, also called *nenbutsu* 念仏. The *nenbutsu* was often recited to the dying people, as

it was believed that Amida would have saved the ones who invoked him with sincerity just before the final breath, allowing them to be reborn in his Western Paradise (Yamasaki 1988: 39).

Mori's *Pure Land* ultimately represents the heavenly location seen through the artist's eyes. An additional source of inspiration for the piece can be found in what is traditionally conceived as the central location for Amida Buddha's worship – the *Byōdōin* 平等院 temple, near Kyoto, and in particular its *hōōdō* 鳳凰堂 ('Phoenix Hall').<sup>1</sup> Considered to be Amida's earthly residence, the building was enriched by decorations of bodhisattvas flying on clouds, with musical instruments, and is dominated by the formidable sculpture realized in 1053 AD by distinguished master Jōchō 定朝 (b. n/a – d.1057 AD), portraying a serene Amida sitting on a lotus flower, at the center of a luxuriously decorated aura with elaborate details. Jōchō's Amida Nyōrai is one of the highest manifestations of the style that developed in different areas of the country until the Kamakura period, and set a canon of sculptural proportions that remained unaltered for centuries (Vesco 2021: 372). The multiplicity of characters in the decorations of this room connects the Hall and its Amida sculpture to another concept of Pure Land Buddhism, which I would suggest as a further element to better understand the piece by Mori; the *raigō* 来迎 ('welcoming descent').



Figure 13. Jōchō, *Statue of Amida Nyōrai*. Hōōdō (Phoenix Hall), Byōdōin, Kyoto. ca. 1053. Wood, fabric, lacquer, gold leaf. Image reproduced under CC BY-SA 4.0 license. Photo Zairon, Creative Commons.

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<sup>1</sup> This place of worship was built in 1052 AD by Fujiwara Yorimichi 藤原頼通, who dedicated the Phoenix Hall to Amida Buddha (Horton 2008: 40-41).



Figure 14. Unknown artist, *Descent of Amida and Twenty-five Attendants (Haya raigō)*. Chionin, Kyoto. 13rd century. Gold and paint on silk.

The term *raigō* was used to indicate the glorious ceremony of Amida Buddha descending on Earth to greet and accompany the deceased's soul to heaven, an event that was believed to be reserved only to those who had faith in the *nenbutsu* and who should not, therefore, fear death. The *Amida raigō* scenes started becoming a recurrent subject in a series of pictorial and sculptural works of art around the year 1000 AD (Mason 2005: 142). I believe that, when compared, many analogies can be traced between Mori's *Pure Land* and the traditional *raigō* representations. One of these is a painting on silk from the XIII century from the *Chionin* 知恩院 temple in Kyoto, also called *Haya raigō* 早来迎 (fast descent). The diagonal composition, developing from the top left corner to the bottom right, depicts Buddha with a group of bodhisattvas, all descending on Earth towards the house of the dying man who will be accompanied to the Pure Land (Mason 2005: 209). In contrast with the sculpture by Jōchō mentioned above, in this representation Amida is not sitting, but stands at the center, surrounded by clouds and by a multitude of celestial beings. The standing figure, the long garments, the act of flying: all these are shared elements that can arguably lead to assume that Mori was influenced by the *raigō* aesthetics for the composition of the last of the *Esoteric Cosmos* photographs. Another analogy in common between the image *Pure Land* and the *Haya raigō* painting is the presence of a crowd in procession in both artworks, with rather different results: while it is composed by several bodhisattvas and sacred beings

in the traditional piece, in Mori's contemporary view the holy figures have abandoned the human form and look like aliens, to suggest that they do not belong to the human dimension.

#### 4. Exploring sacred architecture in *Kumano* and *Dream Temple*

Mori's interest in exploring the sacred space, religious architecture and temples – that reached its maximum realization with *Dream Temple* at the turn of the century – was anticipated by another video piece, called *Kumano (Alaya)*. Mori realized the video between 1997-98 in order to explore an aspect of spirituality that differs from the previous body of work, rooted deeply into Buddhist concepts, to explore a more syncretic perspective on religion. The artist chooses to set the scene in the Kumano area, in the northern part of Kansai region in Japan. The location has a particular relevance from both an historical and spiritual point of view, having been the destination of pilgrimages since the Heian period, through a path called *Kumano Kodō* 熊野古道.

Besides being a *meisho* 名所 (famous place), Kumano is a location that holds several religious elements and beliefs, and this is the characteristic that led Mori, who walked the itinerary of this area herself, to realize the piece. This pilgrimage has repeatedly been entwined, since ancient times, with the concepts of life and death: as mentioned by Rodríguez del Alisal (2007), records show that it was not uncommon for people to come to this area towards the end of their life, aiming to expiate their sins (Rodríguez del Alisal 2007: 79). Moreover, the Kumano area was generally believed to be the earthly representation of the Pure Land (Reader 2005: 9-10). One of the main points of interest of the *Kumano Kodō*, and a perfect example of the cults in the area, is the Nachi waterfall 那智滝, one of the tallest in Japan, considered to be a divine presence. In addition, one of Kumano temples is believed to be the place where the itinerant monk Ippen 一遍 (1239-1289), the leader of the Pure Land Buddhist school *Jishū* 時宗 ('The Time School'), received an important revelation on faith and was taught by one of the deities of the area the importance of the *nenbutsu* (Moerman 2005: 72-73). Mori's fascination with a location so dense with religious references was the main reason behind the choice to set the scene of her artwork here.

The video *Kumano (Alaya)* is composed of different parts: at the beginning, the viewers find themselves immersed in a dense, foggy forest. In this surreal atmosphere, suddenly the camera shows a mysterious, octagonal temple and, as the video continues, we can witness the apparition of several sacred beings, all played by the artist. Next to a waterfall that looks like Nachi, a woman clothed in a white kimono and with a mirror headdress performs a ritual to honor the surrounding nature. The gestures of the ritual are invented by the artist, as well as the symbols that appear intermittently on

screen, like a prehistoric writing. Suddenly another female figure, also dressed in white and with a fox of the same color on the back, runs away as soon as she realizes she is being watched.

The first character that appears in the video can be understood as an alternative version of the shaman often played by Mori in her pieces. Indeed, the element of the mirror recalls the historical figure of Himiko 卑弥呼 (approx. 170–248 AD), the first ever documented female ruler in Japan. Her kingdom was a wide region called Yamatai 邪馬台 during the third century AD, approximately 300 years before the country was unified under one sovereignty (Yoshie, Tonomura and Takata 2013: 5). Himiko was traditionally believed to be gifted with magical powers and have a knowledge of shamanic practices; historical accounts record her as the receiver of one hundred bronze mirrors from Chinese Wei court, and it seems that the object was added to her ritual set. The iconographic motif of a woman dressed in ancient clothing and holding a mirror has famously become a direct reference to Himiko through the centuries (Miller 2014: 182). Mori's performance in *Kumano (Alaya)* can be understood as another contemporary version of this visual trope.

The other figure in the video also hides a deeper meaning. Indeed, the detail of the fox is an interesting reference to native mythology: in Japanese popular imagination, the *kitsune* 狐 ('fox'), besides being an animal, is traditionally believed to be a mischievous spirit who has the ability to transform into a fascinating woman in order to deceive men, and who can possess humans. In a broader way, the *kitsune* is perceived as either a positive or negative omen (Foster 2015: 178). In the video, Mori confers these two different natures to her woman-fox: the *kitsune* turned into human, and the supernatural being who can guide the pilgrim through Kumano's paths (Hayward 2007: sec. *Garden of Purification*, para. 4). All the above-mentioned elements are united together simultaneously in the large-scale photograph *Kumano* (1997-98), that combines the various details of the video: we can notice the temple, the shaman, the fox, all surrounded by the luxuriant nature of the Kumano area.



Figure 15. Mariko Mori, *Kumano*. 1997-98. Color photograph and glass. Courtesy the Artist.

The temple that appears in *Kumano* (both video and photo) is a crucial element in the artist's work, as this is the first apparition of what will be developed in a full-scale installation by Mori in the following years, called *Dream Temple*. The octagonal floorplan of the building and the shape of the roof recall the *Yumedono* hall 夢殿 ('Hall of dreams') in the *Hōryūji Tōin* 法隆寺東院 (the East Pavilion of the *Hōryūji* temple) in Nara. The building significantly impressed Mori, who stated, 'In a powerful dream I had on the night I walked to Kumano, a temple appeared. [...] Later, when I visited the *Yumedono* temple, [...] I felt it was the temple in my dream' (Hayward 2007: sec. *Garden of Purification*, para. 4). We can consider the video as an anticipation of a new turn in Mori's work: with an increasingly solid technological support, her pieces will gradually shift from two-dimensional photographs and videos to sculptures and large-scale, immersive installations.

The shift towards an exploration of the sacred space through installations, unifying art and technology, becomes even more tangible in 1998-99. As the technique changes, we can notice that Mori takes her self-portraits out of her art. Although we do not see her image anymore, the artist maintained her presence within the artwork by realizing specific performances that accompanied the presentations of these installations, as one-time events that introduced the public to the new piece. Holland (2009) sharply points out that 'Mori has maintained a transitory presence in her post-body installations through performance' (Holland 2009: para. 31). These performances often seem to take the form of meditation or rituals; for the *Dream Temple* exhibition opening at Fondazione Prada in Milan in 1999, for instance, the artist acted in the role of a *miko*. Furthermore, the collaborations with studios of architects and engineers have been crucial in order to realize her visionary projects of this

phase, and in giving shape to Mori's exploration of the overlap between art and technology. The artist ultimately hopes for this union to be of support for improving the world and the humankind. As King states,

[Mori] sees this technology, now available to almost everyone, as an influential and predominantly positive force. It provides a form in which dreams, fantasies, and visions of the future become more and more real, helping to advance culture. [...] Mori says, "It seems to me that using technology in art is very appropriate, because we can actually create a vision. I'm very excited and also hope that art and technology can merge to make something that's very important in the world" (King 1998: 19-20).



Figure 16. Mariko Mori, *Dream Temple*. 1999. Mixed media. Courtesy the Artist. Photo Richard Learoyd.



Figure 17. Yumedono, Hōryūji, Nara. VIII century. Image reproduced under CC BY 2.5 license. Photo 663highland, Creative Commons.

Several works have been realized in this direction since then. Her exploration of the sacred architectures finds what can be probably considered its most excellent example in the above-mentioned *Dream Temple*, completed as a proper installation only in 1999. A thorough architectural research is at the core of the project by Mori, which for this artwork was inspired by *Yumedono* hall. Part of the UNESCO World Heritage list, the *Hōryūji* is composed by around 50 buildings, some of which are among the oldest wooden monuments still existing globally.<sup>2</sup> The *Yumedono* that can be seen now is a VIII-century building that was erected where the private palace of Shōtoku Taishi 聖徳太子 (574-622) was believed to be originally. Shōtoku was a key figure in promoting Buddhism in the country, and often considered its founder (Blum 2002: 81). In the collective imagination the *Yumedono* became, therefore, the sacred place par excellence, unifying historical events and religious elements. This exceptional location is the perfect starting point for Mori's hyper-technologic installation.

Mori's *Dream Temple* replicates the octagonal structure of the *Yumedono* but is made with completely different materials, mainly glass, which confers the structure a uniquely glowing and oneiric appearance. Presented in Milan for the first time, the installation was made possible thanks to a synergy between architecture/design studios based in Italy, US, and Japan, which took care of building its different parts. The project is composed by different sections that go beyond the simple external structure, all of which can be fully experienced by the viewers: indeed, they are allowed to walk the glass steps that conduct to the entrance of the building and, once inside, they discover that the space is surmounted by a hemispheric dome that is, in fact, a screen – the real protagonist of the work. A digitally animated video is screened there: a sequence of colorful shapes from micro and macro universes that seems to transcend time and space (Mori, Nakazawa and Iida 1999, sec 3, para. 4-5).

The artist's aim is to encourage the viewers to undertake a journey through their own self by crossing the iridescent space of the *Dream Temple*, whose ever-changing nuances can be seen as a representation of the humankind's mutable consciousness. Moreover, the temple is conceived as an invitation to meditate and, in order to do so, only one visitor at a time is allowed inside, which emphasizes the personal journey made by every individual, alone, from birth to death. Mori thoroughly described the different phases of the video screened inside the *Dream Temple* with these words:

The video traces the process of going very deep into your own consciousness. This is visualized as sinking down in water, allowing the mind to clear. In the beginning rain rises

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<sup>2</sup> [whc.unesco.org/en/list/660/](http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/660/) - The UNESCO page on the Hōryūji complex.

<http://www.horyuji.or.jp/> - The Hōryūji website.



to the sky, to break down the concept of space, and then you find yourself sinking through a deeper and deeper sea of water until you reach complete darkness. Once there is complete blackness, a rainbow of small and large bubbles begins to appear in waves. These rise to the surface of the sea, symbolizing all emotions leaving the body. When they have left the body, they rise to the sky and disappear, and you see a light emerging from a golden cube. Once you are inside the cube, you float through reflecting clouds in a blue sky which becomes a pink sunset. Slowly the clouds are sucked into space. [...] The next images trace the gathering of gases, as in the evolution of solar system. You see the sun and the light growing and growing, the stars are born from the viewer's stomach. The bright light represents the viewer's internal light in both physical and metaphysical sense. [...] There are no boundaries between you and others. Rather, we are all individuals, floating free as one (Hayward 2007: sec. *Dream Temple*, para. 6).

All these different phases described by Mori compose a cycle that narrates the harmony reached between microcosm (ourselves) and macrocosm (the space). Light is a major supporting element of the installation, as it contributes to confer a sense of sacrality to the setting, which enchants the viewer. The artist also stated that her own experience with meditation is the starting point of the images in the video: she initially began hand-drawing these shapes herself, but she soon realized that animation and computer graphics were necessary in order to render her visions of the transcendental energy. (Hayward 2007: sec. *Dream Temple*, para. 6). Germano Celant, who curated the show in Milan, suggested that *Dream Temple* can be seen as the conclusion of a research developed by the artist, who, after an analysis on the female figure in Japan in her early works, traveled through different territories and landscapes – as confirmed, I would add, by works such as the *Esoteric Cosmos* and *Kumano* – in order to redefine her own position in the world. For Celant, *Dream Temple* is pure stream of consciousness, as Mori lets the viewers witness directly the images in her mind through the video (Celant and Mori 1999). In doing so, however, one must not forget that Mori firmly believes that reality and perception do not exist in only one, unmovable manifestation. This is in line with the doctrine of *Yuishikishū* 唯識宗 ('Consciousness Only' School), according to which everything in perception is subjective, and the object does not exist before being perceived by consciousness, which is different for every individual (Yamasaki 1988: 9). Mori highlighted the importance of this doctrine in realizing the *Dream Temple*, whose itinerary can help the individual in discovering his own inner world (Hayward 2007: sec. *Dream Temple*, para. 12).

### 5. We are all connected: sharing experience, rediscovering ancient roots

In the years following *Dream Temple*, Mori focused mainly on perfecting interactive art installations, conceived as collectively shared experiences. In these, the spectators become the key not only to experience, but also to activate the artwork. The pieces, in order to fully work as intended, need human interaction. Two of the main projects from after the turn of the century, *Oeness* and *Wave UFO* (both 2003), are the best examples of this new trend in Mori's art. The former was initially created as an introductory step for the latter; but, as it developed, it became a piece on its own.



Figure 18. Mariko Mori, *Oeness*. 2003. Mixed media. Courtesy the Artist. Photo Marcus Tretter.



Figure 19. Mariko Mori, *Wave UFO*. 2003. Mixed media. Courtesy the Artist. Photo Richard Learoyd.

*Oneness* is composed by six identical sculptures representing blue anthropomorphic beings, approximately one meter tall, which stand on their feet and, facing outward, hold hands to form a circle. One might notice that these creatures look very similar to the attendants that surrounded the deity in Nirvana and Pure Land, but here they look more developed, and their purpose differs from the previous pieces: in *Oneness*, the visitors are encouraged to kneel and hug the sculptures, thus activating the installation. When hugged, the individual sculpture comes to life: its eyes light up and a mechanism turns on a heartbeat that can be heard by leaning on its chest. If they are all hugged together, the circular base of the installation illuminates, confirming a universal harmony between the participants. In a broader sense, the alien symbolizes the other, the unknown, and can be seen as our way to connect with the outside. In this way, *Oneness* can become a transcultural metaphor: Mori stated, 'I could be seen as an alien in another culture. Anyone living outside their own culture could be seen as an alien. We are different as individuals, but we are the same human beings' (Hayward 2007: sec. *Oneness*, para. 1).

The concepts of equality and interconnectedness between the whole humankind are even more evident in the complex installation *Wave UFO*, completed in parallel with *Oneness*. Reinforcing the collaborations with engineers and architects that were incredibly fecund to realize the previous projects, *Wave UFO* is an impressive hybrid mechanism that unifies technology, biology and art. The piece was exhibited in public and international venues across Europe and the United States, being presented, among the others, at Public Art Fund in New York City in 2003, and at the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Art Biennale in 2005. From the outside, the installation looks like a 11-meters, opalescent structure, with

the shape of an elongated oval and a tail at one end, which connotes it somewhere between an extraterrestrial vehicle and a biomorphic entity. The fiberglass stairs and door are the only access to the inside of the apparatus. Similarly to what happened in Dream Temple, the machine can be fully experienced only from the inner space, looking at its hemispherical ceiling; the visitors are allowed inside in small groups of three people at the same time. Here, they lay back on seats at the center, facing upwards; once in this position, sensors will be attached to their forehead, which capture their brain waves and project them in different shapes and colors onto the domed ceiling. The overall image that originates and evolves on the screen in front of the visitors' eyes is the result of the combination of their three minds, working together and differently at the same time. The participants are also aware that what they are witnessing is a unique experience, created by the connection of those specific individuals at that specific time. As our feelings and sensations mutate constantly, the same projection cannot happen twice. A statement by the artist is the perfect explanation of the idea behind *Wave UFO* and, more in general, all the following works:

All beings in this world may appear to exist independently, but in reality we are all connected. Every living being exists with an infinite relationship. The body given by ancestors, the oxygen supplied by nature, the food obtained from the land, the earth, and the universe... We are all sustained here thanks to gifts bestowed on us by all living beings. [...] Through *Wave UFO*, it is my wish that all people in this world will connect with one another, crossing political and cultural borders (Mori 2003: 43).

In this quote, I believe the reference to the ancestors and the past – as well as the sense of gratitude to nature in a broader sense – is fascinating, as it leads us to the next step of the evolution of Mori's art. Indeed, the keen interest in spirituality, as well as the ancestral connections between the living beings and the nature, are developed even further in Mori's installations realized after 2003, the moment when the artist began travelling across Japan and explored the archaeological sites of the Jōmon period 縄文時代 (approx. 11000-400 BC). These locations had a strong impact on the artist's projects of the following years, as she discovered that the ideas of life and death shared by the primordial civilizations do not differ from the beliefs of many religious doctrines she inspected in her past works. Moreover, these seem to connect directly with the studies on the universe developed by contemporary quantum physics. Mori articulates the concept with the words,

According to some archeological discoveries about the Stone Age, new evidence has proved that ancient people believed in the existence of a netherworld and reincarnation. [...] After you are dead, your dead body will soon rot, but your spirit would open the gate

into eternal life. [...] Also, based on the latest scientific discoveries, especially from quantum physics, our universe is continuously experiencing its own death and rebirth. [...] For me, these two completely different ideas, ancient people's vision of death and life and the latest theories in physics, see the same kind of truth (Nicholson 2006: 44).

The artist decided then to revisit these themes and started creating installations that replicate the shapes of stones and monoliths used in primitive rituals, realizing them in different materials like glass, acrylic or ceramics: *Transcircle* (2004), *Primal Memory* (2004), *Tom Na H-iu* (2006) and *Flatstone* (2007) are all examples of this trend. Late Jōmon archaeological sites such as Ōyu, in Akita Prefecture, had an important role in shaping the design of these artworks. Monuments made of big stones and cobbles were discovered in those locations, arranged in wide concentric circles of varying dimensions – the external ones with a diameter of approximately 50 meters in Ōyu, for instance. It seems that these monuments had a ritual function and were perhaps indicating burial sites (Mason 2005: 21). An interesting element of these impressive compositions is the presence of a tall monolith at the center of the inner ring of stones, supposedly a sundial. This site is the manifestation of the Jōmon understandings of the world and the afterlife, as well as a representation of the calendar obtained by observing the natural phenomena, the sun and the stars movements. Since their whole subsistence depended on nature, Jōmon civilizations must have been extremely attentive to these phenomena, as it is demonstrated by the fact that the two monoliths at the center of the circles in Ōyu seem to be in line with the point on the horizon where the sun sets during summer solstice (Kobayashi 2004: 180).



Figure 20. Ōyu stone circles, Kazuno, Akita Prefecture. Late Jōmon. Image reproduced under CC BY-SA 4.0 license. Photo G41rn8, Creative Commons.

Mori's projects of this phase can be seen as a way for the artist to recreate a sacred space where the experience of death and rebirth come together, not differently from the architectural works of the previous years (Holland 2011: 19). I would also add that they offer a precise depiction of a strong, ancestral connection between the observation of cosmic phenomena and the prehistorical production of human artifacts. From the works mentioned above, I believe that *Flatstone* is one the most striking examples of how the artist can recreate a prehistoric object by using completely unexpected materials. *Flatstone* is composed by 22 flat pieces of white ceramics, all different in shape, that recreate the outlook of primitive cobbles. These are arranged on the floor in a vaguely pentagonal shape that might recall the floor of a small former building, now disappeared. Three additional 'ceramic stones' are lined up in front of the site to suggest a lane, a progressive path that leads to its entrance. In this contemplative atmosphere, the central element of the installation is the artifact that stands at the center of the scene: a transparent, acrylic vessel that is the exact reproduction of a famous earthenware vase from Medium Jōmon, which is currently part of the collection at Idojiri Archaeological Museum in Nagano Prefecture.

Pottery production was crucial in the prehistoric period, and different decorative trends have been noticed across the Jōmon eras: from the 'cord-marked' decorations of Early Jōmon to more complex ornaments of the later periods. The vessel at the Idojiri Museum is a particularly elegant example of the *kaen doki* 火焰土器 ('flame pot') style of Medium Jōmon, which was characterized by irregular, swirling or flaming motifs in the upper section of jars and vases (Tsuji 2019: 10). Mori adds, thus, a true historical reference to her recreated site, and establishes a strong connection with the ancient period through a direct reference to the existing artifact. Her modern version of the prehistorical vessel can arguably be seen as an invitation to the whole humankind to find a way to reconnect with its roots and with nature, as it was in ancient times. The artifact might have evolved and changed with time, but for Mori it is crucial that the funding concept of the whole installation remains unvaried from the original site: the central ideas is the ritual, the observation of natural phenomena, and a link with nature that must be recovered by using, if needed, the support of science and technology.

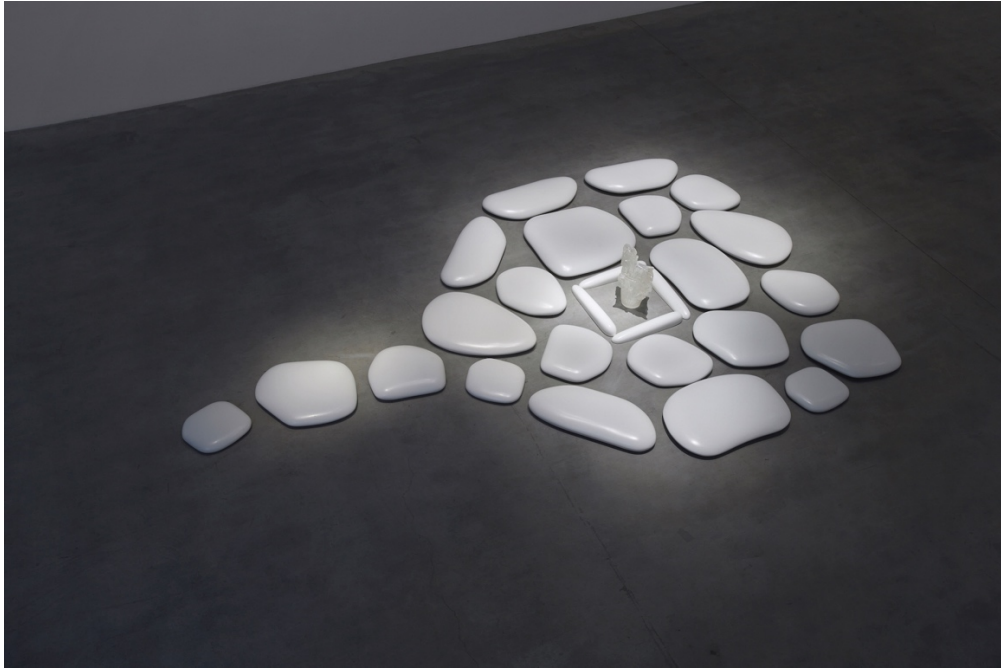


Figure 21. Mariko Mori, *Flatstone*. 2007. Mixed media. Courtesy the Artist. Photo Tom Powel Imaging.



Figure 22. Unknown artist, *Large, swirling water-flame patterned pot*. Middle Jōmon. Earthenware. Courtesy Idojiri Archaeological Museum.

## 6. In honor of nature: Mariko Mori's environmental installations

In a 2006 interview, Mori was asked the question, 'Are there any art forms that you have not yet attempted that you want to do in future?' 'Outdoor Sculptures' (Nicholson 2006: 45). This changed in the past few years, when the artist started realizing site-specific installations in natural areas of the world. In this final section, then, we will look at the most ambitious and complex of Mori's projects, composed by different parts and still in progress. I would argue that all the previous trends in Mori's art converge into this project: the Buddhist influences of the pieces mentioned above interweave with the concepts behind the works of the last years.

In 2010, Mori established the Faou Foundation, a non-profit organization that is the result of her growing interest towards environmental issues. Through the collaboration with local communities, Faou Foundation aims to build a series of public art installations in different places of the inhabitable continents of the globe (Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, South America, Oceania) with the aim to encourage a sense of collectivity between all the living beings, and to honor nature. The installations, once completed, will also recreate an ideal connection between all the different parts of the world, conveying a message of global harmony. So far, two works have been installed: *Sun Pillar (Primal Rhythm)* (2011) in Miyako Island, Okinawa, Japan (Asia); and *Ring: One With Nature* (2016) in Muriqui, Mangaratiba, Brazil (South America). The next upcoming piece, which the Foundation is working on at the present moment, is going to be realized in Ethiopia (Africa), but the details are still to be uncovered.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth mentioning briefly the first of these projects. Standing on a rock at the center of Seven Light Bay in Miyakojima, the monolithic element is the central part of *Primal Rhythm*. Its *Sun Pillar* is a 4-meters tall structure made in transparent layers of acrylic that recalls a sundial of the ancient sites mentioned in the previous section. It's during the winter solstice, which is a powerful symbol of rebirth, that the installation is activated, as the viewers can see the sun setting precisely behind the pillar, creating an ideal line that connects the Earth and the universe.

The second of the Faou Foundation projects that we will see in detail is the fascinating installation *Ring (One With Nature)*, which was presented to the public on the occasion of the 2016 Rio Olympic and Paralympic Games. The piece is composed by a large circular structure with a 3-meters diameter, installed on top of the Vêu da Noiva, a tall waterfall in Cunhambebe State Park, Muriqui, in Rio de Janeiro, which Mori said appeared to her in a dream years before.<sup>4</sup> The result is a rather visionary scene,

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<sup>3</sup> [www.faoufoundation.org](http://www.faoufoundation.org) - The FAOU Foundation website.

<sup>4</sup> [www.faoufoundation.org/ring](http://www.faoufoundation.org/ring) - Page dedicated to *Ring: One With Nature* on the FAOU Foundation website.



where the circular shape seems almost suspended on top of the 60-metres cascade. Due to its materials, the colors of the circle change constantly, according to the different ways it is illuminated by the sun rays during the day, which make it vary from blue to white and gold.



Figure 23. Mariko Mori, *Primal Rhythm – Sun Pillar*. 2011. Courtesy the Artist. Photo Richard Learoyd.



Figure 24. Mariko Mori, *Ring (One with Nature)*. 2016. Courtesy the Artist. Photo Stephanie Leal.

Similarly to the other examples that were inspected previously in this article, *Ring (One With Nature)* is another artwork in which we can notice multiple layers of meaning, as it is the result of several different concepts. First of all, I would suggest that the presence of the waterfall could be perceived also as a link to the previous *Kumano* works, where the environment – as it happens in *Ring (One With Nature)* – played a key role for the development of the scene.

Other additional readings are suggested by the shape of the sculpture, which directly recalls the official symbol of the Olympic games: the five intersecting rings, metaphorically referring to all nations of the world united in the global event. This idea behind the Olympic logo is not too dissimilar from the concepts of interconnectedness that Mori has been conveying through her art. *Ring (One With Nature)* can therefore become by extension a symbol of peaceful coexistence, once again linking people from all over the world into one collectivity.

In addition to the above, and in line with these concepts, it is worth noting that the ring can be understood as a direct reference to the idea of an all-encompassing universe of Buddhist origins. Indeed, the circle has a strong religious meaning for Chinese and Japanese traditions, as it is a powerful symbol for Zen Buddhism. Called *ensō* 円相 in Japanese, the circle has been considered the representation of the wisdom of Buddha, or by extension even Buddha himself, as it shows perfection in its shape that has no beginning and no end (Brinker, Kanazawa and Leisinger 1996: 256). It is a recurrent motif in traditional Buddhist art and calligraphy, and as highlighted by Seckel and Leisinger,

[i]conographically – apart from sun and moon as symbols of various holy figures – the circle can be found first of all in the shape of the wheel, and above all in the shape of the nimbus, surrounding the head or frequently also the body of an enlightened one. [...] The concept of “circle” or “round” is important for the description of timeless eternity without beginning or end, of perfection, of the ultimate truth, of the intrinsic essence and its perception, since the circle is “full” as well as “empty” (Seckel and Leisinger 2004: 71-72).

The circle is widely present in Zen paintings of long tradition; called *zenga* 禅画 in Japanese, the style re-flourished during the Edo period 江戸時代 (1600-1868 AD) and particularly in the 18th century, but its influence on art and design can be noticed also in modern and contemporary times.<sup>5</sup> The *zenga* style is characterized by simple brushstrokes, usually realized in one color and halfway between a painting

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<sup>5</sup> One notable use of the influence of *zenga* iconography on XX-century art is the Gutai 具体 founder Yoshihara Jirō 吉原 治良 (1905-1972), who dedicated the last decade of his life to repeating a series of *ensō* paintings in acrylic, as a form of spiritual discipline (Munroe 1994: 94).

and a calligraphic exercise, where a figurative element is often accompanied by a short text. Usually in the form of the hanging scrolls, these paintings were meant to evoke a concept of the Zen Buddhist tradition and to support the practitioner through meditation (Mason 2005: 325). Excellent examples of the *ensō* paintings of this style can be found in works by the renowned master Hakuin Ekaku 白隠慧鶴 (1686-1769) and the eminent Tōrei Enji 東嶺円慈 (1721-1792), who is believed to be his best disciple (Joskovich 2015: 321). Later works of Meiji period 明治時代 (1868-1912) reproducing this motif can be found in the practice of more recent artists such as Sekiren Ashizu 蘆津石蓮 (1850-1924).

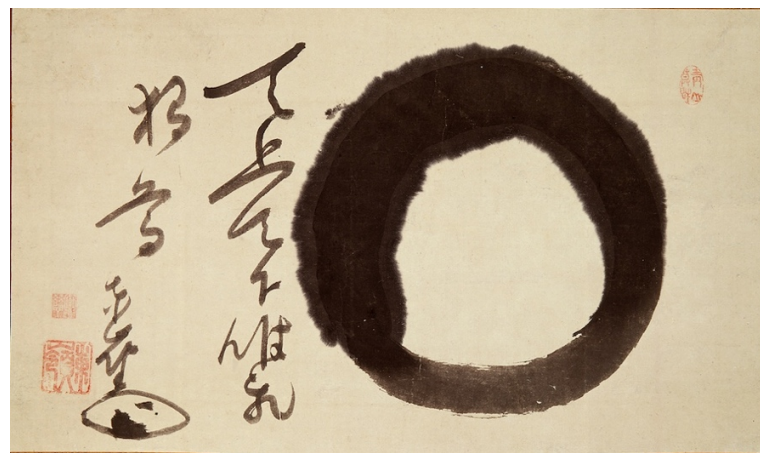


Figure 25. Tōrei Enji, *Enso*. XVIII century. Hanging scroll, ink on paper. Gitter-Yelen Collection (collection ref. 1972.1)

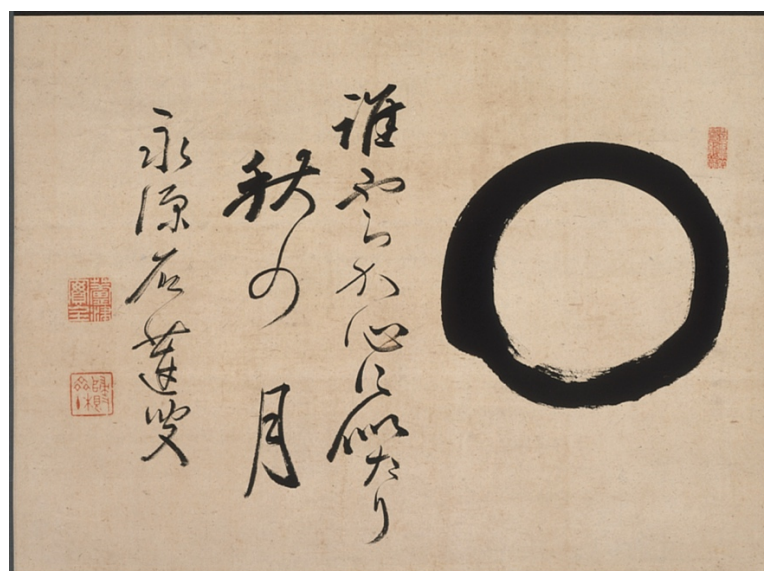


Figure 26. Sekiren Ashizu, *Enso*. Meiji period. Hanging scroll, ink on paper. Gitter-Yelen Collection (collection ref. 2004.22).

We have seen the circle in other previous pieces by Mori: the dome of *Dream Temple*, the base of *Oneness*, or the ceiling of *Wave UFO*, for instance. In these artworks the shape is repeatedly used to convey a sense of balance and peace. So, the circle can be understood as one of the recurring elements of her art: however, in *Ring (One With Nature)* the shape has a predominant position and truly celebrates the harmony of nature through an installation of unprecedented complexity.

## 7. Conclusions

Through the article, I wished to highlight a fascinating aspect of Mori Mariko's art, who I find to be one of the most interesting and complex Japanese artists working on the international scene nowadays. Moreover, the choice of dedicating a study to topics such as interconnectedness and collectivity through art seems crucial in the present moment, when these concepts have been put at risk by global issues such as the pandemic and the environmental danger – something that may have caused in many of us growing feelings of anxiety, isolation, and uncertainty.

This overview is partly developed from a previous research that I conducted on the artist for my postgraduate dissertation a few years ago.<sup>6</sup> Recently I was inspired to go back to these concepts by Mori's latest activities, which I kept following regularly; besides the most recent exhibitions that have been dedicated to her in different venues – mostly involving new sculptures – it was in particular during the first phase of the current global pandemic that I noticed the artist's ideas of collective spirituality being presented under an innovative light.

In 2020, during the international lockdown, Mori hosted on her Instagram account a series of events called *Tea Ceremonies*, a series of conversations with other artists and curators connected in real time.<sup>7</sup> Anish Kapoor, Sugimoto Hiroshi 杉本 博司, Nara Yoshitomo 奈良美智 are just some of the guests that participated in these virtual events, each of which started with a long-distance tea ceremony performed by Mori for the other person. Overturning the social criticism of the *Tea Ceremony* photograph from 1994 mentioned at the beginning, the 2020 series of conversations with the same title become an invitation to share a moment together, to connect with each other as equals. Very refreshing to watch as an external viewer, they were precious occasions for the artist to get in touch with the others, to carry on conversations, and to share thoughts and reflections with all the viewers

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<sup>6</sup> <http://hdl.handle.net/10579/2575> - link to the open access version of the dissertation *L'arte di Mariko Mori: La preghiera della sciamana*. © Federica Cavazzuti 2013.

<sup>7</sup> [instagram.com/marikomori](https://www.instagram.com/marikomori): Mori's official Instagram account.

who, once again, were metaphorically linked together by participating remotely to the events in a renewed collectivity.

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