

SEAN KELLY

Kerr, Dylan. "Stranger than Science Fiction: Mariko Mori's Techno-Spiritual Vision for the Future of Art," *Artspace*, December 17, 2105.

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Stranger than Science Fiction: Mariko Mori's
Techno-Spiritual Vision for the Future of Art



The artist Mariko Mori. Photo by David Sims. All images courtesy of the artist and Faou Foundation unless otherwise noted.

Since she first emerged on the international art scene in the early 1990s, the Japanese multimedia artist Mariko Mori has been living in the future. She has transformed herself into a cyborg and a space princess for her performative interventions in her home city of Tokyo, designed a brainwave-reading dream pod in her 2003 work *Wave UFO*, and reimagined ancient standing stones as networked displays for the Super-Kamiokande observatory in *Tom Na H-iu II* (2006).

Along the way, she's traveled around the world and delved into research topics as seemingly disparate as neutrinos and human evolution, or cosmology and eco-tourism. Although her techniques vary, her projects consistently advance a techno-utopian vision of the future coupled with a reverence for the innovations of prehistoric civilizations—as well as a firm belief in the power of art to realize her ideals in the present.

In addition to making work for exhibition (her show of 3D-printed sculptures in her signature pearlescent white at Sean Kelly Gallery received positive reviews earlier this year), Mori has lately been occupied with running the Faou Foundation—an organization dedicated to promoting her idea of oneness through site-specific installations. Artspace's Dylan Kerr visited Mori at the Faou Foundation's New York headquarters—an all-white office space on the 19th floor of a Midtown skyscraper—to learn more about the making of her international projects, how technology has started to catch up to her futuristic visions, and why she thinks Buddhism may be the best hope for humankind.

Much of your earlier work from the '90s is decidedly pop-inflected, with direct references to Anime culture and the like. What prompted the shift towards the more universal, mystical, and ecological approaches to art making that we see in your work now?

Starting in 1995, I went to 13 cities around the world with my *Body Capsule* for the "Beginning of the End" series, including Angkor Wat, Teotihuacan, Tokyo, and Manhattan. In the final work, completed in 2000, all the cities are connected—east and west, as well as past, present, and future.

The photographs in these projects don't come from stock images—I actually visited all those places. Encountering nature and these prehistoric sites through this work was a mind-opening experience for me, because I'd always lived in cities. Interacting with nature like this, I saw how powerful it was. These archeological sites show very clearly that our ancestors selected these places that are naturally very powerful. The sensitivity of our ancestors became relevant to these experiences of nature, and those experiences really drove me in this direction. Throughout this time, I was also studying Buddhism, Shintoism, and Eastern philosophy, so that also helped move me towards this body of work.

I'm glad you brought up the spiritual underpinnings of your work—a lot of the ideas you explore fit in nicely with classical Buddhist beliefs, especially when it comes to the fundamental unity of all life. What role do these traditions have in your work?

In 1999, I produced a work called *Dream Temple* that was deliberately reflecting on the Buddhist philosophies of the mind-only school. Through this kind of research, I've learned the Buddhist concept that only our minds exist. I talked about nothingness and all the connections, how we are all one. Through the process of producing these kinds of work, I've been introduced to these ideas.

Working with these traditions isn't about what is true or what is right—it's about introducing a perception of how we look at our world. When I started to look at the world in depth, I saw the connections, that, yes, we are all one whole, part of nature, and I think it's quite important to become aware of that at this moment.

Your major project of late has been the Faou Foundation, which you started to help realize a series of site-specific installations around the world. What was the impetus for this organization?

Human-like beings evolved about 7 million years ago, and recent DNA research shows that we can all trace our lineage back to a single female ancestor from Africa who lived around 150,000 years ago—we really are all part of one family tree. At the same time, all over the world, our prehistoric ancestors show us that they were connected with nature. We built monuments with reference to things like the winter solstice or the vernal equinox, and we created similar forms all over the world, from Egypt to Mexico to Japan.

Based on my research into prehistoric cultures, I take the view that we were one world before, and that we can become one again. The Faou Foundation believes that art can act as a link between different disciplines, including cultural studies, ecology, sustainable development, and so on. Art can be a symbol for these things, one that is able to put forward an image of an ideal future.

Faou's mission is to honor every characteristic of nature on earth, and we want to do so by inheriting the traditions that our remote ancestors practiced. The plan is to make a site-specific installation that promotes the concept of oneness on all six inhabited continents. The first project was on Japan's Miyako Island—the next one will be in Brazil, outside of Rio de Janeiro.

What can you tell me about your first Faou Foundation project, the one in Japan?

The Faou Foundation's first project was the Sun Pillar and Moonstone on Miyako Island. The Pillar—which we completed in 2011—is made out of layered acrylic, the same material used for aquariums. It's neither solid nor hollow. Sandwiched between these layers is a special pigment that changes color depending on how the light hits it. During the winter solstice the Pillar will cast a shadow on our future project, the Moonstone, which will float in the bay near the Pillar.

Miyako Island itself has about 500 sacred places—a lot for one little island with a population of only 70,000. They have hundreds of rituals for these sites annually. The sea around the island, which is closer to Taiwan than Japan, has breathtaking corals that are very well preserved. It's almost untouched, how I imagine the world used to be before animals came onto the land. We really wanted to protect the natural landscape and the corals, so we used a wooden raft to push the Pillar across the bay and built scaffolding for the installation to avoid damaging the rock. We also used chain block pulleys throughout—no machines.

The Faou Foundation also has an educational program. This year, we sent high school students from Miyako Island to the Benesse Art Site, where they saw site-specific installations and contemporary art museums. They came back with plans for doing a future project on the island to honor nature. These are small things, but they're planting seeds for the new and future generations.

What about your future project in Brazil, Ring?

The project in Brazil is part of the 2016 Rio Olympics cultural program—it will be installed next July, prior to the games' opening. The plan is for an acrylic ring to be erected above the waterfall. When

sunlight hits it from the front, the Ring will look blue, but when it shines through the back it will appear gold. We put different colors between the layers of acrylic to create this effect. It's a special permanent pigment that comes from the natural pearl. The structure is 30 meters tall—we're working with the internationally-known structural engineering team Arup on the design. The poles holding the Ring will be painted the same color as the trees to disguise the support structure, so you'll only see the Ring floating above the waterfall.

The five Olympic rings symbolize the union of the various nations and ethnicities under the auspices of the games. We'd like to present a sixth ring that represents the union of humanity and nature. The site itself is the Treze Waterfall in Teresópolis, about two hours from the city of Rio. It's a beautiful ride, and a spectacular site once you get there. From the other side of the falls, you have a view of the mountains and landscape around Rio—it's a really nice place.

Planning these kinds of high-tech projects—especially those in out-of-the-way locations—requires a different approach to art-making than simply showing up at the studio. What is your process like?

It depends. Sometimes the technologies I want to use simply aren't there yet, so we need to develop them. I put together a team of software and hardware experts, who I share my ideas with. They give me their knowledge and experience and help me figure it out. The works are really collaborations with these engineers.

Really, the idea and the vision come first—then I see what's available. I've had to wait for years in order to have the computer technology to do what I wanted to do. Look at my work Wave UFO from 2003—when I was in production in 1999, I had to have huge supercomputers the size of refrigerators, which cost a fortune. A few years later, I could do it without a problem on a PC. The timing has to be right.

Another example is my recent exhibition at Sean Kelly Gallery. It started from the 3D printing process, but no one had used 3D printing to make sculptures with these forms. Everything has to be engineered. That's why the vision comes first—the process is bringing that vision to the world.

The works you refer to from the Sean Kelly exhibition are variations on the Mobius strip, an old geometric puzzle. Why were you drawn to this form?

I was interested in the book *Endless Universe*, written by the Princeton physicists Paul Steinhardt and Neil Turok. They talk about the universe before the Big Bang. We've been taught that everything starts from nothingness before the Big Bang, but their idea is that our universe exists on a brane floating in extradimensional space and that the Big Bang was caused by two of these branes colliding.

Simply put, they say that the universe can be endlessly created. This inspired me to create different forms of Mobius strips, sometimes with two strips colliding with one another. I'm thinking about the life of the universe—it doesn't end.

You mentioned earlier that you see art as uniquely suited to connecting disparate pursuits like ecology, spirituality, and education. What is it about art that enables it to move through these different areas?

Art is about representing our minds, with no real boundaries. Languages have boundaries—if you don't know the language, you can't understand what's being said. Art is universal. It's a crystallization of what's in our minds. If we want to crystalize our minds to promote environmental awareness, say, then that becomes a symbol for others to see. It can be a magnet for these ideas, such that the work itself could influence conversations around these subjects. The Faou Foundation works are markers in nature to bring people and their attention to these places, to be in front of and in the natural world.

The reality we have now is the result of our imaginations over thousands of years, so if we imagine something for the future that in turn can become reality. We are responsible for our own future, so we have to imagine something positive. That's the important shift. Art can lead the world in these circumstances.

When I see all this beautiful nature, I see that we have to make sure that it's there for our future generations. It has given us everything, and it's not only for us. We started 7 million years ago—why should we stop now?