

imagined communities is a result of this arbitrary division of the world into two. In my view, it is only further exacerbated by the contemporary mode of existence, characterized by alienation and individualism within the celebratory politics of neoliberal globalization. This, I feel, is the real culprit that caused barriers between individuals in general. Of course, physical distance matters too, and language is only one symptom of this crisis. I engage rigorously with the world through performing “languages”: those rooted in representation, as well as those rooted in the aural. In exploring their potential, I deflect to disciplines such as linguistics and comparative philosophy to supplement the discourse that argues against our imagined distance from each other. Hopefully, convening knowledge, affects and feelings through art—

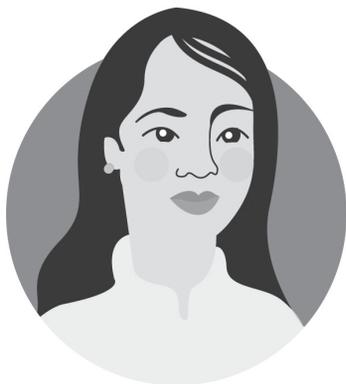
and particularly through performance—reveals the silly contradictions in assumed moral high grounds and brings people closer to each other. I like “performing” knowledge, insofar as it enables a rhythm of engagement and destabilizes rhetorical assumptions. I think that as long as we are talking to each other, understanding and empathy are able to emerge. This is also the only way to create a culture to call our own. Hopefully, it would be a culture of hospitality and openness. ☺

PIONEERS

Mika Yoshitake

looks back
at the art of

NOBUO SEKINE



THE PIONEERS SERIES AIMS TO SHED NEW LIGHT ON ARTISTS WHO HAVE CREATED TRULY INNOVATIVE WORK, TRAILBLAZERS WHOSE LEGACY LIVES AND REVERBERATES IN THE CURRENT GENERATION.

Can you explain the beginnings of your career? I am especially curious about your primary sources of inspiration, as well as your interest in topology—a major theme that defines your early practice, distinguishing it from the trend of optical distortions initiated by the “Tricks and Vision” exhibition in 1968.

I began to think at the time that one of the major themes within contemporary art should be a “new awareness and interpretation of space.” So I became interested in topology, a subset of non-Euclidean geometry. Within topology, forms are stretched, compressed and treated very freely.

Questioning how it would be possible to make topological space experiential, I began to work on a group of relief sculptures (which I initially considered paintings) titled the “Isō” series (*Isō* is “Phase” in Japanese)—or, as it became known, the “Topology” series. As you mentioned, I exhibited this work in the 1968 exhibition “Tricks and Vision,” held at Tokyo Gallery and Muramatsu Gallery in Tokyo. For this reason, this body of work is often referred to as “tricky” (optically, as with Op Art), but the original

Nobuo Sekine
Phase of Nothingness—
Black No.13, 1977



impetus behind the work had always been to enable viewers to experience topological space.

Could you talk about the shift between those works and the subsequent series “Kusō (“Phase of Nothingness”)?

You are asking me why I began titling my works *Phase of Nothingness* (*Kusō*) instead of *Phase* (*Isō*). Personally, I thought *Phase* was just fine, but as I began to make works with truckloads of raw oil-clay, or by levitating stones weighing several tons, I started to feel a disconnect between the title and the works, which by then were heavily engaged with matter. As conditions surrounding my work changed, the word *Isō* felt limiting. I began using the term *Kusō* to de-

Nobuo Sekine (Japanese, b. 1942) is an artist who lives and works in Tokyo and Los Angeles. He is represented by Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/ New York/ Tokyo.

note a liberated state of *phase*, in the topological sense of the word, and to imply that it is infinitely variable. Of course, I was also aware that there is the concept of *Kusō* in the Heart Sūtra in the Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism.

Can you tell us about the phenomenon of Mono-ha as a movement, and your encounters with Lee Ufan in particular?

About one week after I made *Phase—Mother Earth*, I ran into Lee Ufan at a gallery in Shinjuku. He had published interpretations of *Phase—Mother Earth* that fundamentally differed from the impressionistic reviews common at the time. I thought they were amazing. I also thought that without a theorist like him in our clique (an informal group of art students, some (like me) just out of graduate school), we wouldn't be able to establish a new art movement. So I invited him and my friends to meet regularly at a Shinjuku coffee shop called "Top" (it's still there), where we spoke tirelessly about art. That continued for about a year and a half, and looking back, I think we are all the better for that happening.

Lee's discovery and subsequent theorization of *Phase—Mother Earth*

eventually came to cement Mono-ha's interpretive framework. One could even argue that Mono-ha came out of his response to your work.

I think your interpretation is right in many ways. There was a lot of dialogue at the gatherings I just mentioned on the theory and framework you're pointing out. Intuition is of course indispensable in making work, but so is the language surrounding it. I think it's an interdependent relationship.



Phase of Nothingness—Black,
Yokohama studio, ca. 1977

Intuition is indispensable in making work, but so is the language.

Sekine will have a solo exhibition at MOCA Pacific Design Center, West Hollywood, from September–July 2016.

Lee's essay, "Beyond Being and Nothingness" (1971), offers insights into philosophies as a model for how direct experience can be activated through three conditional modes: Gesture (the reciprocation of action between man and matter), Corporeality (the ambiguous structure of the body as both self and other), and *Tōpos* (the situational engagement of perception). Did you agree with this model?

You are asking me to explain the notion of "encounter" using Lee Ufan's three

philosophical terms, but this would be difficult for me. I customarily speak another language. But what I can offer is my own initial reaction to the very moment *Phase—Mother Earth* was completed.

I took off the straw rope holding together the plywood mold and made an incision with a saw. The mold fell off smoothly, revealing packed earth. It was wonderful. Nobody knew what to say; silence permeated the air for some time. The sheer presence of the dirt mass appearing before our eyes was powerful. Its existence felt abnormal. The combination of the positive and negative cylindrical earth forms, a hole and a clod sharing exact dimensions, stood in proximity to one another. It seemed their precise relationship activated the "being of matter." Essentially, to me, materiality, an activity engaging with it, and *Tōpos* defined as "a place," becomes requisite.

How do you think Mono-ha can be distinguished from Minimalism or process-based practices of post-Minimalism? I'm thinking particularly of works like *Phase of Nothingness-Water* and *Phase—Mother Earth*?

Within my own interpretation, I think Mono-ha and Minimalism are very similar. It could be that the act of minimizing expression

may have brought us close to each other. But one drastic difference is that where Minimalists tended to reduce forms conceptually, Mono-ha's efforts were to absorb and transplant nature.

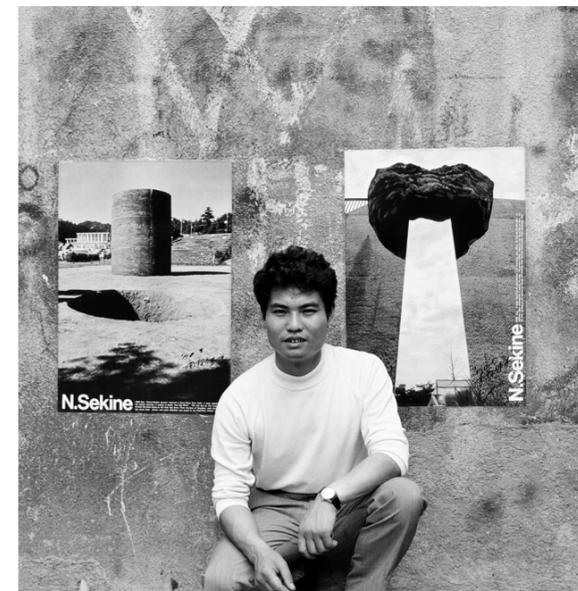
For example, *Phase of Nothingness—Water* is comprised of rectangular and cylindrical containers of the same volume, each filled to the brim with water. They are lacquered black, making the water unnoticeable at first glance. Getting closer, as the water picks up the vibrations and shifts in airflow caused by people moving around, it faintly ripples, allowing the viewer to detect that the works are not solid. Through that process, the viewer is able to acknowledge the water, to feel the autonomy of nature. In *Phase—Mother Earth*, with the coexistence of the positive and negative minimal forms, we can glimpse the physicality of earth, hitherto overlooked.

Can you tell us about your experience living in Italy after exhibiting *Phase of Nothingness* at the 35th Venice Biennale in 1970? How did your experience affect your later practice?

Living in Italy, I was very interested in its urbanism, which was very distinct from what's found in Japan and something I hadn't experienced. I became very interested in the historical relationship in Europe between civic life and the city, and the position of art within that. So when I returned to Japan, for many years I did a lot of public/environmental work. But it was an incredibly demanding and social way of working, so now I have limited myself to an individual art practice.

How do you see your role as an artist? As an intermediary to expose nature? Your famous phrase "to wipe the dust off things" refers to an artistic process exposing fundamental structures through which matter is revealed.

In the beginning, I purposefully made work that could be returned to its origi-



Artist portrait, La Bertesca, Genoa, 1970

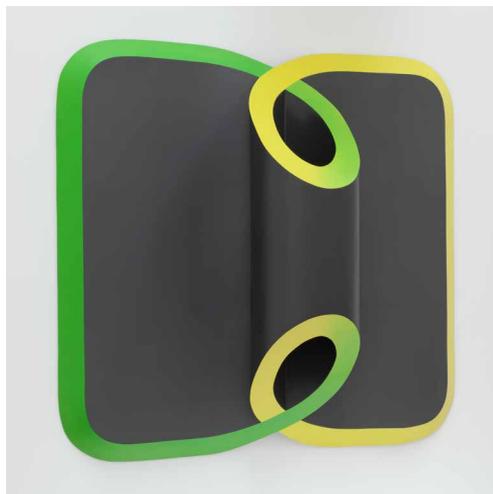
Phase No.9, 1968/2012

Next page: *Phase No. 10*, 1968

All images courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, New York/Los Angeles/Tokyo



Mika Yoshitake is Assistant Curator at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. In 2012, she curated "Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha" at Blum & Poe in Los Angeles, which traveled to Gladstone Gallery in New York.



nal condition. *Phase—Mother Earth* can be returned to the ground, and basically it's the same with *Phase—Sponge*, as well as *Phase of Nothingness*. Each work can be discarded. It's possible then to explicitly see the differences between their before and after states, what ostensibly stays the same, and understand blatantly what the carried out activity "was." I thought that if I were able to extract from the works a sort of basis of artistic activity, I would be spared from carrying out egocentric activity as an artist. So now, I feel more aligned with the importance of coexisting with nature as opposed to investing in a "creative" practice.

Your work has been revelatory for both art historians and younger artists today who seek new ways to engage the actuality and phenomenality of matter. Given recent tendencies toward an anthropological interest in art, what do you feel is your legacy to younger generation of artists?

My biggest hope is to distance myself as much as possible from the subjectivism followed by artists of the 20th century. Fully taking in the wonders of nature, to understand its abundance, is to leave your own subjectivism for an objective world outside of yourself. 🌀

*Translated from Japanese
by Robert Becraft.*

RENAISSANCE MAN Jeffrey Deitch advocates for FREE PHOTOGRAPHY



THE RENAISSANCE MAN SERIES IS THE SITE OF UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS AND PERSPECTIVES THAT CHALLENGE THE BOUNDARIES OF VISUAL CULTURE.

When I asked Banksy, through an intermediary, to participate in the Art in the Streets exhibition at MOCA in 2011, he wrote that he would consider being part of the show on two conditions: that there would be at least one day a week with free admission, and that there would be free and unrestricted photography.

I asked the museum's financial officer to estimate the lost admissions revenue if Monday, the day with the sparsest attendance, were to be made free. After a quick calculation, the response was that if Mondays became a free day, even if only for the run of the show, we would stand to lose \$50,000 in admissions revenue. I reported this to Banksy, who immediately offered to send a contribution of \$50,000 to compensate.

