

Journeys with Nobuo Sekine

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Nobuo Sekine and I had many conversations during our travels. In fact, they were more than just travels—we were blessed with opportunities to exhibit together.

The first journey, needless to say, was the few weeks in 1968 when I was involved in the creation of *Phase—Mother Earth* at the Suma Rikyū Park in Kobe. Those days were like a training camp consisting of Sekine, myself, Katsurō Yoshida, Junko Kushigemachi, and Takako Uehara. Every day began with the physical labor of digging a hole and piling up the excavated earth and ended with us gathered in lively conversation at a hostel. It was a miraculous experience. The initial fog of wondering what would be born from our daily labor cleared the more we sweat through it, until finally we saw the completion of *Phase—Mother Earth*, a moment of explosive joy. Even now, fifty years later, I find that experience to be a shared source of relief and trust for the five of us.

The next journey was at the Louisiana Museum of Art's guest house in Copenhagen in 1971. Sekine had been living in Italy after his participation in the 1970 Venice Biennale, and I was exhibiting in the 1971 Paris Youth Biennale, so we met up in Copenhagen and spent just over a month together. We were so excited during our conversations and debates, in which we developed our theories of art and process over drinks every night. I think that experience revealed the divergences and harmonies between myself and this brilliant man, Nobuo Sekine.

After returning to Japan, Sekine founded the Environment Art Studio and I was involved in re-creating works by Yoshishige Saitō that had been lost during the war. Sekine, who had once worked as Saitō's production assistant, occasionally showed up and helped me. One of the things I enjoyed about the process of re-creating those works was the dialogues with Saitō. Whenever Sekine joined, the conversations became more energetic, and I saw how they trusted and appreciated each other.

I moved to Kansai the following year and Sekine was busy with his Environment Art Studio projects, so we had fewer opportunities to meet, but we would see each other when taking part in group exhibitions at museums or having solo shows at galleries. Funnily enough, even if we had not seen each other in a long time, the moment we did it was as if the distance between us reverted to the space we shared in Suma Rikyū Park.

After that, we ran into each other during trips to Paris, Antwerp, Venice, and Beijing, where we had numerous conversations, but the one I will never forget was in Cambridge in 2001. We were sitting in the shade on a lawn overlooking the river with punts passing by, gazing up at the clear blue sky in May. Perhaps because we were growing told together, we were neither in conversation nor in silence—we were just relaxing in the early summer breeze. In the midst of our intermittent exchange of words, Sekine said, “It seems like Professor Saitō is in bad shape. He’s ninety-five.” Saitō was like a father to us, and Sekine and I had this vague idea that he would be immortal; we even hoped for it. Yoshishige Saitō passed away a month later. I felt like I had lost my artist father, but I wonder how it felt for Sekine.

The next time we met was ten years later at the gallery in Los Angeles. I was in the middle of installing my work, and Sekine arrived late. He still had time to do his work, so he started to help me with mine. Perhaps the two of us joking with each other while working was an intriguing sight for an American gallerist to behold. Maybe this scene of two artists harmoniously helping each other make their work was hard to believe. But for the two of us it was a matter of course—the moment of our encounter was a return to the time and space we shared fifty years earlier. Things probably would have been even livelier if Katsurō Yoshida had been there.

Perhaps the last time I had a proper conversation with Nobuo Sekine was at his house in Los Angeles. To be honest, we were supposed to catch up for the first time in a long while over drinks in Taipei on January 12, 2019. However, he was not feeling well and did not come to Taipei. Only his new works were delivered to the gallery. I saw a certain kind of fulfillment in those works. I thought that Sekine himself must surely feel their potential.

A few months later, Nobuo Sekine set off on a journey. Alone.

The departure of Yoshishige Saitō was akin to losing a father figure, so the departure of Nobuo Sekine feels like the loss of an older brother and is deeply painful.