

What I Wanted to Ask Sekine

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One of the artworks that had the greatest impact on me when I was a student was Nobuo Sekine's *Phase—Mother Earth* (1968). What a daring and determined work, I thought. Of course, I was born in 1959, so I have only seen it in photographs, but as a confused young man who had a rebellious attitude toward the old-fashioned Japanese art university classes of the time, it made me feel the true joy of art and filled me with courage. As I began my life as an artist, I made a commitment to myself that I must strive to do something as extraordinary as *Phase—Mother Earth*. The strategy I adopted was to displace the earth. To move the earth as a social and political entity. I thought about rolling a ball of earth into a museum just like a Scarabeus dung beetle, and then in contrast having a helium-filled ball gently floating above. Around that time, Sekine happened to attend an exhibition of mine at a gallery in Kichijōji. I could not ask him directly what he thought of my secret endeavor, but I particularly remember that he was very happy with something I had written in a magazine. I understand Mono-ha as the act of stripping a "thing" of its social meaning and function and imbuing it with ambiguous interpretation by abandoning it with minimal human intervention. There is no message in this act; rather, a message is perceived as an element of impurity. I faintly remember Sekine and I talking about how, our works both related to the earth and yet dealt with different subject matter. Thinking about how *Phase—Mother Earth* was remade in a corner of Expo '70 in Osaka, a gaudy festival that recruited avant-garde artists but under the banner of national policy, I wonder if by abandoning interpretation together with the "thing," the work therefore became detached from the artist's intention and indeed continues to convey a social message in the contemporary era. It has been quite some time since we last met, but if I had the chance to ask Sekine about this, I wonder what he would answer.

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Translated by Ashley Rawlings