

## **Phase—Mother Earth, or, The Arrival of Nobuo Sekine**

Lee Ufan

In the fall of 1968, a huge cylindrical cavity and protrusion appeared in the concourse of Suma Rikyū Park. It was a mysterious sight, as if a giant had pulled out a piece of the earth and placed it on the ground. A vast, cloudless blue sky spread out overhead. As I wandered around, I shuddered with the thrill that I had encountered some kind of extraordinary mythical event. I suddenly had the flash of an idea. This could be the state of being of mother earth itself. What a magnificent state of being. The more I observed it, the more I comprehended how the world is replete with eventuality. At some point the cylinders will deteriorate and flatten as though nothing had happened, eventually caving in and filling up. Thus, it would all become part of the world, washed over by the waves of everyday life and nobody aware of it. Now, what lay before me, rendered through the act of a single artist, was mother earth being mother earth. Nobuo Sekine's *Phase—Mother Earth*.

Together with his friends, Sekine excavated and piled up the earth to create the concave and convex cylinders. It conveyed a single form of a state of being that both receded and protruded. Through an intervention of procedure, process, and action, they turned a part of natural phenomena into a dualistic phase that was neither existent nor nonexistent. Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria, Robert Smithson and other artists did things that were referred to as Earthworks, but all of them were realizations of the existence of their concepts applied to the earth. Sekine obtained his concept from the phenomena of the earth. Or rather, he was summoned by mother earth and the concept came into being. The internal encountered the external. Although this is an idea that relates to *tariki hongan* notion of benevolence through reliance on others in the sense that his work accepted the laws of nature, one could say it was a Copernican revolution in the fact of making. Thus, what we have here differs from an artist's internal "composition of an artwork": by taking what is there just as it is and presenting it *just as it is*, a renewed world of artistic production is opened up. This creation does not proclaim to be almighty; rather, it is a scene formed by an act of dialogue between the internal and the external.

I first met Nobuo Sekine in the spring of 1968. I think it was at Shirota Gallery, which was on the second floor of a small building in a backstreet of Ginza nichome in Tokyo. (Sekine later told me that we had already met at Tokyo Gallery or somewhere else, but I have no memory of it). We got to know each other and, while we were not exactly lovers, it was not long before we were meeting up almost every day. He had a great interest in topology and esotericism, and I often talked to him about phenomenology and physics. One time, he looked at a copy of Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques* that I had brought with me and proudly

said, “I read that book. Lévi-Strauss is interesting, isn’t he?” Eventually he introduced me to his fellow Tama Art University alumni Katsurō Yoshida and Susumu Koshimizu, and soon after I was also meeting frequently with Kishio Suga, Katsuhiko Narita, Kōji Enokura, Noboru Takayama, Noriyuki Haraguchi and having discussions with them over drinks. Before that, in the summer of 1967, there was a time when Junzō Ishiko and Genpei Akasegawa took me on a visit to Jirō Takamatsu’s house. On that occasion, I heard Takamatsu say that there was this talented guy called Sekine at Tama Art University who might well shake up the art world. At that time, it was Katsuhiko Narita who was working as Takamatsu’s studio assistant.

Talking of 1968, France was undergoing a revolution that May, the Zenkyōtō movement had begun in Japan, and it was the height of the hippie era in the United States. In the midst of the international Cold War structure, Japan had entered a period of high-speed growth, but for all the singing about the attainment of wealth, there were also the paradoxical cries of students and intellectuals in autonomous revolt—the cacophony of knowledge being dismantled and a historical narrative showing signs of collapse. According to Foucault, “things” that had been constrained in logos were starting to be separated into words and things. In other words, large cracks had appeared in modern ideology and the world was exposing the phases of nontransparent events. In the art world, the notion of seeing called into question and the illusionistic phenomena of Op Art and “tricky” expression came into vogue.

It was in the midst of this kind of situation that Sekine appeared. However, nobody knew what his arrival signified. Yet of course he was popular, held aloft like Cinderella. In a short time between 1968 and 1969, he swept up the awards at many important art exhibitions, starting with the *Contemporary Art Exhibition of Japan*. It is a fact that this alone won him recognition and led to his sudden increase in prominence. Reading the critical commentary on his work, one sees how critics variously pointed out the colorful illusionistic shapes, the novel ideas, the mysterious sense of presence, and the curiousness of the forms. While those texts can be described as compliments leading to evaluation, I do not think they understood what Sekine was trying to do. To me, it showed nothing but their misunderstanding. One could try to say that an artwork that invites multiple interpretations is superb for that very reason. But was it not the case that the mood gradually turned negative, with critics not even hiding their confusion about how, so soon after Sekine’s arrival, this artistic tendency to examine “modes of being” spread throughout Japan—a development that should even be called the Sekine Phenomenon? The trend was to call that tendency Mono-ha, but I do not know of a single critic who defended it or viewed it positively. If anything, perhaps it is common knowledge that they were unanimously critical and reproachful in tone. The most common criticism was that this tendency was too reliant on things. They remarked that the artists denied the fact of making, that the artworks have no self, that it was mysticism, and that it was the destruction of art history. In short, the artists were ridiculed as being unable to make or draw anything so therefore they just throw things around.

That was because their actions did not appear to be productive, nor did most of the things they presented seem to have been made, and art terminology had trouble accommodating notions such as disposition, premonitions, or conditions being laid bare in temporary, site-specific contexts. Sekine's *Phase of Nothingness—Oilclay* (1969), a performance at Tokyo Gallery in which he opened up the space by gathering, compacting, exposing and scattering oil-infused clay, is a masterpiece of this kind of practice. What makes Sekine's work so different from conventional expressions is that it is not the transformation of an idea into a world of its own but an event in which the internal and external interact. To put it another way, it was about re-perceiving encounters with the world through actions. The transition of things, spaces, and situations became a keyword, and it became a re-presentation of the world's phenomena. Through the artist's mediation, all variability was brought to the fore and the works shone as anonymous events. That is where they differ from Earthworks and Arte Povera, which internalized externalities and were a narrative form of expression. This could be seen not only in the work of Sekine but other Mono-ha artists—Narita, who turned wood into charcoal; Enokura, who soaked walls with oil; Koshimizu, who filed down part of an iron plate; Suga, who diagonally propped a sheet of glass on a slender plank of wood; and Lee, who dropped stones on sheets of glass to crack them—expressions not of self but mediator, not of being but phenomena, alive with endlessly fluid, turbulent externality. The emergence of Mono-ha, which put a brake on the reproducible production of self-representation in art and introduced the renewed presentation of events inherent to the world, could indeed be called an event in the history of civilization. In other words, Sekine and his friends transcended modern ontology and realized a truly avant-garde expression that re-perceived worldly events.

While I was on my way to Paris to take part in the 1971 Paris Youth Biennale, I visited Sekine, who was residing in Milan. Taking advantage of his participation in the Venice Biennale a year earlier, Sekine was now based in Milan and had exhibited at galleries in Genova, Copenhagen, and other places in Europe. I remember an occasion when Hidetoshi Nagasawa, who lived in Milan, invited us to a meal at Luciano Fabro's house, and I was surprised by Fabro's interpretation of Sekine. He said that Sekine's works were expressions of metaphysics without knowing metaphysics. When I asked him what he meant, he said that something mysterious spills out of them even though there is no bottom serving in support. I felt strangely ambivalent about whether I understood what he meant, but I thought it was such an Italian, Fabro-esque thing for him to say. When I was leaving Milan, Sekine told me that when he returned to Japan, he wanted to work in a way that involves the environment. Standing next to him, Nagasawa asked if he was talking about urban design, and he answered that he might be. I asked Sekine if that wouldn't distance him from contemporary art, and with a determined attitude he said that he would be fine with it not being contemporary art. I did not give it much thought at that moment, but indeed, as is well known, upon returning to Japan he

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established a company called Environment Art Studio and branched out into environmentally creative work.

From thereon, Sekine almost entirely disappeared from the course of contemporary art. I do not recall him being invited to any exhibition that showed the latest artistic tendencies in Japan or abroad. As it happens, after that I had two solo exhibitions with Sekine at European museums: the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf in the summer of 1978 and the Louisiana Museum of Art in Denmark later that autumn. Our concurrent solo shows featured my *From Point* and *From Line* series of paintings and his *Phase of Nothingness—Black* series of fiber-reinforced plastic sculptures. Katharina Schmidt, the Kunsthalle's deputy director and curator, was complaining that Sekine had brought different works from those on the documents he had submitted. Knud W. Jensen, the director of the Louisiana Museum, bluntly told Sekine and me that these were just ordinary sculptures or *objets* and have nothing to do with the image one had of Sekine. It seemed that they had been expecting to present his works from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Sekine was bewildered and upset that they were unable to understand his current work.

After that, a few large Mono-ha exhibitions were held in Japan and overseas, and while Sekine presented some of his recent works, I did not see any new ones. One day, Tim Blum visited my studio. Blum & Poe had staged a large Mono-ha exhibition and given Sekine their support, which inspired his move to Los Angeles. He said, "People find it unusual that Sekine doesn't make new works. What do you think?" Honestly, all I could answer was that I don't know either. After he left, I gave it a lot of thought but could not come up with anything, and for some reason I was choked up and all I could do was sigh. I would never be able to see the avant-garde Sekine again. Still now I have no way of knowing why that happened.

Yet, it was not only Sekine: in the mid-1970s, several of the Mono-ha artists moved away from Mono-ha-like ideas. That was the case with Narita and Yoshida, and even other artists were noticeable for their partial return to conventional thinking about plastic arts. Even looking back at myself, my work has developed and diversified in various ways and is not simply a continuation of Mono-ha. What is clear is that this is no longer the 1970s. At the beginning of the 1970s, the Zenkyōtō movement disappeared into thin air, which I think is mysterious even if unrelated. And yet, the mood of an era can be frightening. All over the world, even in literature, theater, and music, artists have become gradually less avant-garde. There are no longer any trends or groups, and everyone works in a disconnected and lonely way.

Was Sekine early to the realization that it was the end of an era? Or at some point did he get confused or stuck, or did the world stop calling out to him? Whatever it was, it cannot be helped. One could also conclude that if, for all the progress inherent to *Phase—Mother Earth*, he could not see a horizon beyond it, then there was no point in striving down that path. Noriyuki Haraguchi, the youngest Mono-ha artist, had a habit of saying "I have one work

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(*Matter and Mind (Busshin)*, 1971) that I cannot surpass no matter how I think about it." Every artist is asked to name their signature artwork. An artist's *raison d'être* is not to leave behind a load of mediocre works that raise no questions. Sekine shone for only three years, more or less. However, I am certain that some of the works from his early *Phase* and *Phase of Nothingness* series will shine forever in the history of contemporary art. *Phase—Mother Earth* in particular is not only his signature work but a proud symbol of Mono-ha. No matter what, when I think about Sekine, who opened up the path of Mono-ha and then departed from it, I bow with deep respect.

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