

“The world that reveals that it is a world”: On The Art of Mono-ha and New Materialism

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Abstract

This paper discusses the relationship between art, perception and human engagement with *matter* in the art of Mono-ha through the use of raw, untreated natural and industrial materials in their sculptures. The nature of human-matter relations in Mono-ha is reconsidered with a New Materialist approach.

Keywords

Art. New materialism. Mono-ha; Japanese art. Matter.

Resumo

O presente artigo discute a relação entre arte, percepção e engajamento, como material da arte do Mono-ha por meio do uso do cru, materiais em estado bruto e materiais industriais, em suas esculturas. A natureza das relações humanas em Mono-ha é reconsiderada, por meio da aproximação com o Neo Materialismo.

Palavras-chave

Arte. Neo Materialismo. Mono-ha. Arte japonesa. Matéria.

"When we realize that ideas cannot be underwritten by things and events but can only be justified by ideas themselves, the object displayed is left hanging between ideas and the concept of that object, no longer belonging to either."

(Suga Kishio, "The Start of Disappearance: As Things Deny Things," 1969)¹

In 2010, Los Angeles Gallery Blum & Poe organized a solo exhibition of artist Lee Ufan, a key ideologue of the Japanese art movement Mono-ha from the 1960s and 1970s. Only two years later the same gallery presented the large-scale exhibition *Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha* including works by ten Mono-ha artists. This historical exhibition was a few months later installed at the Gladstone Gallery in Chelsea, New York. Also in 2012, Mono-ha artist Noriyuki Haraguchi had his first solo show at Fergus McCaffrey in New York. In November later that year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened the exhibition *Tokyo 1955-1970* and in 2013 the Guggenheim Museum in New York opened *Gutai: Splendid Playground*. These exhibitions—a few examples of many more—mark an overdue exploration of Japanese postwar culture. However, this re-emergence is not only part of the Western World's agenda. In 2015, Mono-ha artist Kishio Suga had a major retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, two exhibitions with Tomio Koyama Gallery in Tokyo and another major retrospective at the Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum in Shizuoka.

Mono-ha was founded by the Korean-born U-Fan Lee, who created a uniquely new art that drew from Asian philosophy and culture. Mono-

¹ Suga Kishio, "The Start of Disappearance: As Things Deny Things," 1969 in *Requiem For The Sun: The Art Of Mono-ha*. (Los Angeles: Blum & Poe, 2012), 219-220.

ha is often translated into English as the “School of Things.” However, the Japanese word *mono* is extremely ambiguous and can encompass concepts such as “thing,” “matter,” “material,” and “object.” The Mono-ha artists had a refreshing new approach to the raw materials from which they produced their artwork.² Recently, art critic Sawaragi Noi analyzed Mono-ha in relationship to the principles of *mono no aware*, translated as “the pathos of things.”³ The term coined in the 18th century, *mono no aware*, became central to Japanese cultural tradition and referred to the awareness of and responsiveness toward something: an inanimate object or living thing. A *mono no aware* event is not sentimental or symbolic, but rather a true feeling in both the mind and body.

I suggest in this paper that the increased interest in post-war Japanese art, especially Mono-ha, points to a recent enthusiasm that has been developing in different disciplines called “New Materialism.” While arguably *not a new discipline*, especially if we look at Eastern philosophy (as I point out later), “New Materialism” is a name given to a series of innovative materialist methods that have been emerging since the 1990s across the social sciences and humanities. They rework older materialist traditions to address pressing ethical and political challenges.

For Bruno Latour, the “old” materialism was “an *ideal* and not *material* way of making a point.”⁴ Latour argues that the reason materialists, such as the one of post-Marxists and end-of-the-century sociobiologists, are too idealistic, is because “under the rubric of ‘matter,’

² Janet Koplos, *Contemporary Japanese Sculpture* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 41.

³ Sawaragi Noi, “Mono-ha and Mono no Aware” (Mono-ha to mono no aware) in *Japanese Contemporary Art* (Shincho-sha: Tokyo), 141-171.

⁴ Bruno Latour, “Can We Get Our Materialism Back, Please?” in *Isis* (2007, 98), 138.

two totally different types of movement had been conflated: first, the way we move knowledge forward in order to access things that are far away or otherwise inaccessible; and, second, the way things move to keep themselves in existence. We can identify matter with one or the other, but not with the two together without absurdity.”⁵ In other words, Latour, among many others, believe in the *emancipation* of matter. With a profound interest in the morphology of change, this thinking gives special attention to processes of materialization, which have been sorely neglected by modern and postmodern dualist thought.

Mono-ha is referred to in Western art writing as “Japanese Minimalism.” Although Mono-ha artists were aware of American Minimalism, it is important to point out the differences between them. While North American Minimalism and Land Art seemed so much a channeling of heavy industry and the ego of imposing a vision onto a landscape, Mono-ha is less concerned with imposing a vision and more with creating simple effects. In Mono-ha, the material is the evidence of something that has just happened, or feels precariously like it is about to happen. An example of American Land Art will make this distinction clearer. American Michael Heizer’s immense *Levitated Mass* (image 1) is a 456-foot-long, 340-ton rock at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. (This work was installed in 2012, but Heizer conceived it in 1968 and attempted its construction in 1969). This attempt was abandoned, however, when the boom of the crane being used to lift the boulder broke. The enormous project by Heizer points to the extreme confidence in his own human/artistic power, power over the planet; and there is an

⁵ Ibid, 138-139.

arrogant belief that we can take as much as we want, do as much as we please with nature without threatening our own survival.

Distinctively, Lee Ufan's 1968 *Phenomenon and Perception B* (later changed to *Relatum*) (Image 2 and 3) consists of a sheet of glass that is cracked under the weight of the large stone block placed on top of it. To make this piece Ufan squats on a square sheet of glass laid atop a steel plate of the same size and put his arms around a boulder. With effort Ufan hefts it an inch or two in the air and lets it drop. Instantly the glass shattered creating fracture lines to the edges. About this work, Ufan explained:

If a heavy stone happens to hit glass, the glass breaks. That happens as a matter of course. But if an artist's ability to act as a mediator is weak, there will be more to see than a trivial physical accident. Then again, if the breakage conforms too closely to the intention of the artist, the result will be dull. It will also be devoid of interest if the mediation of the artist is haphazard. Something has to come out of the relationship of tension represented by the artist, the glass, and the stone. It is only when a fissure results from the cross-permeation of the three elements in this triangular relationship that, for the first time, the glass becomes an object of art.⁶

Ufan's commentary on the relationship of "three elements" resonates with scholars throughout history. To mention but a few, William James (1890), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), Jakob von Uexküll (1957) and James Gibson (1986), have all sought to break down this dualism between organism and the environment. The dichotomous *either/or* language—so much a part of the Cartesian grounds of western epistemology and culture—has been drained of its usefulness. The division between subject

⁶ Alexandra Munroe, *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*, exh. cat. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1994), 265.

and object, nature and nurture, nature and culture is replaced by an alternative perspective where one can be *both/and* instead of *either/or*. This materialist approach, as well as Ufan's perspective, is not a method for interpreting certain works of art, but rather a matter of general attitude and way of thinking. A problem would be to interpret a Mono-ha sculpture deriving from the basic assumption of Western thinking that mind and world constitute two distinct entities whose integrity does not depend on their mutual relationships. The American minimalists Donald Judd or Robert Morris, for example, eliminate the additive components and instead opt for the *wholeness* of the work of art (Image 4). The critic and art historian Michael Fried asserts that Minimalist work distances the beholder, both physically and physiologically. Through this distancing the piece becomes the object while the beholder is the subject.⁷



Image 1: Michael Heizer, *Levitated Mass*, 2012, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photo courtesy of Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

⁷ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 116-147.

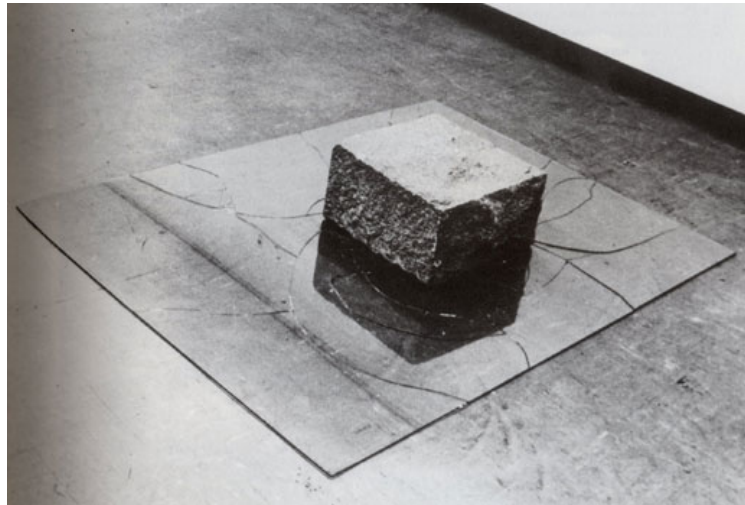


Image 2: Lee Ufan, *Relatum* (formerly *Phenomena and Perception B*), 1968.



Image 3: Lee Ufan breaking the glass for *Relatum* (formerly *Phenomena and Perception B*), 1968/2011, during installation of *Lee Ufan: Marking Infinity* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, June 2011 Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation.



Image 4: Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1965, reconstructed 1971, Mirror glass and wood. © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2016.

Latour's idea of the "actant" is detailed in his book *Politics of Nature* as any "entity," both human and nonhuman, that modifies another entity.⁸ The activity of an entity or a "thing" is described as deduced from their performances, as mediation or translation. Ufan wrote in 1969 that "when humans interpret the world before us, objectify the world, and affirm objects objectified by consciousness, a rational dualism is born [...] We must learn to see all things as they are without objectifying the world by means of representation which is imposed by human beings."⁹ It would be erroneous to think of Ufan's work (or any other Mono-ha piece) in terms of a subject that precedes its materials.

In *Law of Situation* (1971) (Image 5) Suga Kishio placed a line of ten flat stones along the middle of an approximately seventy-foot long plastic board and set it afloat in a lake in Tokiwa Park, located in Ube City. Curator Mika Yoshitake indicates that "the weight of the stones caused the

⁸ Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring The Sciences Into Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁹ Lee Ufan, "Sekai to kozo: Taisho no gakai (gendai bijutsu ronko)" (World and structure: Collapse of the object [Thoughts on Contemporary Art]), *Dezain hihyo/Design review*, no.9 (June 1969), 130.

fiber to sink just below the water's surface" and the water "mediated between the two materials as a third substance signaling their mutual dependence."¹⁰ One can say that Kishio's work is more about creating a situation than about the materials itself. If we compare Kishio's *Law of Situation* with Ufan's *Relatum* we could say that the former begins after the artist has situated the materials (live performances), while the latter's action begins previous to the exhibition of the work when the artist drops the stone onto the glass. In Suga's work the action of things cannot be known a priori, but must be deduced from its performance. If we think of Suga's live performances, who himself referred to as "activations," in relation to Latour's "actant" we can observe that the artist is not purely active, and the material is not purely passive. Instead, it is through the relationships and arrangements that he studied how things existed. His works question the coherence of both subject and object, and treats them as radically contingent.

¹⁰ Mika Yoshitake, "Mono-ha: Living Structures" in *Requiem For The Sun: The Art Of Mono-ha*. (Los Angeles: Blum & Poe, 2012), 111.



Image 5: Kishio Suga, *Law of Situation*, 1971/ 2015 c-print image size: 43.0 x 65.5 cm ed.7 © Kishio Suga

Art critic and editor Janet Koplos, a specialist in contemporary Japanese art theory and criticism, explains that the Mono-ha artists had:

A direct approach to ordinary materials, which were considered to have an inherent character and value; the actual reality of space, bound into works which interacted with their settings, and a relational, relative emphasis in which the sculptor, the sculpture, and the world, were seen as one continuum, in which 'creation' was not possible, and the expression of ego was not desirable.¹¹

Mono-ha artists would juxtapose and contrast different materials to reveal their inner essence and changing characteristics when confronted by the variables of space and time. Toshio Hara, of the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo explains: "Generally, their art is a direct response to natural processes of growth and decay."¹²

¹¹ Janet Koplos, "Mono-ha and the Power of Materials," *New Art Examiner* (19-30 June 1988), 30.

¹² Howard N. Fox and Toshio Hara, *A Primal Spirit: Ten Contemporary Japanese Sculptors*, exh cat., exhibition organized by the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 7.

In Japan, the problem of materiality can be traced back to the literary criticism in the writings of poet and art critic Shūzō Takiguchi in the 1930s, as well as to the Japanese art media dating from at least the early 1950s.¹³ The concern with *matter* in the context of artistic creation has also been crucial for the Gutai group, a post-war artistic group founded in 1954 by painter Jirō Yoshihara. He writes in the “Gutai Art Manifesto” that “Gutai Art does not alter matter. Gutai Art imparts life to matter. Gutai Art does not distort matter.”¹⁴ He continues stating that, “when matter remains intact and exposes its characteristics, it starts telling a story and even cries out. To make the fullest use of matter is to make use of the spirit. By enhancing the spirit, matter is brought to the height of the spirit.”¹⁵ The concern with things and their materiality is essential for Mono-ha artists working in Tokyo in 1960s and 1970s.¹⁶

Mono-ha artists were interested in affective sensations that arise from raw, untreated natural and industrial materials—including charcoal, cotton, dirt, rope, stones, glass, plastic, wire, among many others—installed in ways that would interact with architectural spaces and outdoor sites. Their choice of *mono*, explained the Japanese critic Minemura Toshiaki, “definitely set them apart from the mainstream of contemporary art at the time, which consisted of fabricated works similar to Primary Structures and various kinds of Kinetic and Op objects.”¹⁷

¹³ See Shūzō Takiguchi’s influential essay “Kindai geitjutsu (Modern art)” from 1938.

¹⁴ Jirō Yoshihara and Translated by Reiko Tomii. Originally published as “Gutai bijutsu sengen,” *Geijutsu Shinchō* 7, no. 12 (December 1956), pp. 202–04.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Mono-ha has been used to describe the work of artists Kishio Suga, Nobuo Sekine, Shingo Honda, Katsuhiko Narita, Katsurō Yoshida, and Lee Ufan, among others.

¹⁷ Minemura Toshiaki, “On ‘Mono-ha’” in *Requiem For The Sun: The Art Of Mono-ha*. (Los Angeles: Blum & Poe, 2012), 123.

Toskiaki concluded his essay insisting that “we cannot deny the fact that Mono-ha’s most vexing problem lay precisely in its refutation of the historicity of the medium, which underscores its most original and innovative achievement.”¹⁸

The way Mono-ha artists attempted to explain their practice presents a number of differences when talking about the medium and methodology. In 1970, in a roundtable discussion between six Mono-ha artists—Koshimizu Susumu, Lee Ufan, Narita Katsuhiko, Sekine Nobuo, Suga Kishio and Yoshida Katsuro—they discussed their artistic practice. Suga explains:

The process of making something always involves a human act. Then, what I want to know is whether an intention or an idea that you have before you undertake an action is attached to the resulting thing. Do ideas always adhere to *things*? When we look at it from the end result, it must transcend your method—that is, it must deviate from your intention or idea, to clarify the essential state of *mono* as they exist. Am I wrong?”

As opposed to Heizer’s arrogant practice, Suga’s examination indicates a humble and respectful attitude toward things, the *mono*. In this same discussion, Mono-ha artists talk about the differences between their works and the “earthworks” in the United States. Sekine says that “those Earthworks guys, after all, do not go beyond using nature as it exists physically [...] nature is totally detached as a counterpart to civilization.”¹⁹ This comparison reveals what really mattered for *Mono-ha* artists: to regard their artworks not as iconic or symbolic descriptions of some pre-existing world, but as instruments for perceiving and engaging with the

¹⁸ Ibid., 213.

¹⁹ Ibid., 214.

environment and their surroundings. Sekine very eloquently explained that:

when you see a painting, it has something the artist wants to say. By now, in conventional practice, an artist desperately seeks to give a fully realized form to such a plan or an intention of his. However, in my case, when I think of *Phase (Iso)* or *Phase of Nothingness (Kuso)*, they do not express what I want to express. Things like a plan or an intention are nothing more than a method of presenting occasions to encounter *mono*. I use these plans or intentions as methods to bring about occasions to see something...²⁰



Image 6: Nobuo Sekine, *Phase of Nothingness-Water*, 1969/2005
Steel, lacquer, water. Courtesy Blum and Poe Gallery.

With a similar philosophy, the American feminist theorist Karen Barad uses to term “agential realism” to define her relationship with the materials. She defines agency as “not something that someone or something has to varying degrees [...] Agency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of

²⁰ Ibid., 213.

possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements. So agency [...] is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices.”²¹

Mono-ha artists’ practice is deeply rooted in the Japanese spirit of Buddhism and Shinto that believe in the unity of the divinity and nature. In both their artworks and writings, Mono-ha artists express a great respect for materials presented as parts of the universe, functioning *within* and *entangled* with larger natural orders. In his 1969 essay “World and Structure: Collapse of the Object (Thoughts on Contemporary Art)”, Lee Ufan compares the function of artworks to that of the Buddha: “the world is the world acting as the world with or without the presence of the Buddha, but it is by the Buddha’s presence that the world is revealed.”²² Mono-ha artists present stones as nothing but stones, metal as nothing but metal, they do not see themselves in the center of the universe, instead they work *with* materials to reveal “things” as entanglements of matter and meaning.

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