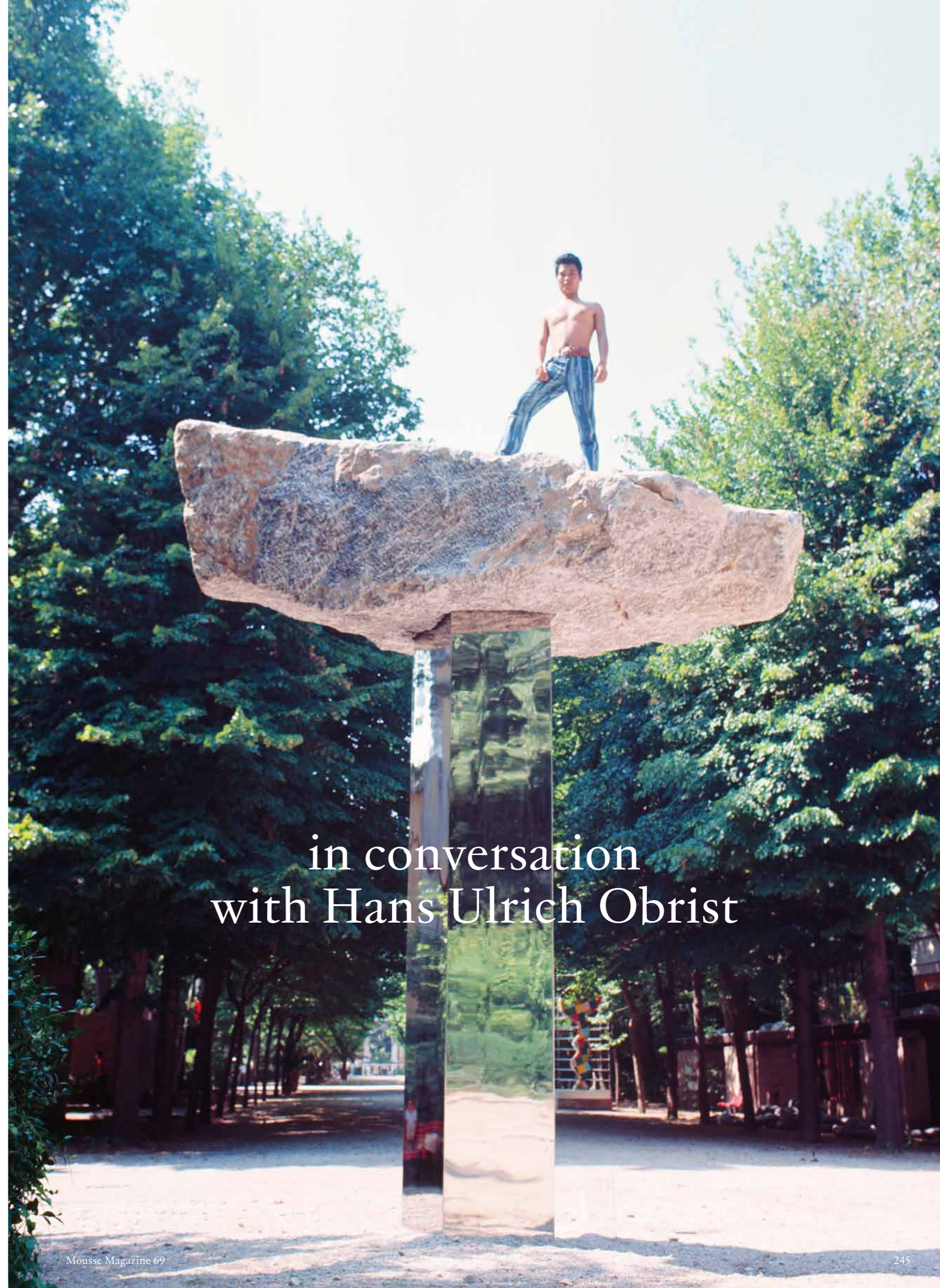


# A Telepathic Understanding of Form

Nobuo Sekine

in conversation  
with Hans Ulrich Obrist



In this conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist from August, 2018, the recently deceased Japanese artist Nobuo Sekine overviews his long career, from his first interests and influences during his studies at Tama Art University in Tokyo and encounter with pioneers Jirō Takamatsu and Yoshishige Saitō to his participation at the Venice Biennale in 1970 and an incredible series of unrealized projects for cities and landscapes. Working with sculpture and installation since the late 1960s, and internationally recognized (along with Lee Ufan) as central in the development of Mono-ha, a movement considered instrumental in postwar Japanese art, Sekine since the very beginning engaged with the concept of phase in topology, a branch of mathematics concerned with abstract space and connectedness through which he perceived form, material, and space as malleable entities.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST

Tell me about your beginnings, when you were a student at Tama Art University in Tokyo. I've studied quite extensively the 1960s in Japan, for instance in my 2011 book with the architect Rem Koolhaas, *Project Japan: Metabolism Talks*. During the research for that catalogue I came across work by Jirō Takamatsu and Yoshishige Saitō. Tell me a bit about your time as a student, and how you came to art. Who were your teachers? Was there an epiphany?

NOBUO SEKINE

The first artist to inspire me was Jean Fautrier, especially since—in my perspective—his work was not *that* kind of beautiful, but much more visceral. That was my beginning. That was when I first got into art.

HANS ULRICH

And how did you discover Fautrier? Were your parents into art?

NOBUO

When I was in high school, I was in an art club that had a library full of avant-garde magazines that introduced me to artists from the West. That's how I discovered Fautrier. My parents had nothing to do with it.

HANS ULRICH

Jirō Takamatsu and Yoshishige Saitō were your teachers, and two very distinguished artists. As a student, what did you learn from these pioneers?

NOBUO

Yoshishige was my teacher in my third year at Tama. He had a vast range of knowledge. He was really a pioneer of the constructivist movements in Japan, and so there was a big interest in that realm of thought from Europe. He was interested in different disciplines beyond just art, which was something he taught me.

HANS ULRICH

And Takamatsu?

NOBUO

Yoshishige introduced me to Takamatsu, and I served him as an assistant. As you may know, I worked with him when he represented Japan at the Venice Biennale in 1968. He told me a lot about his ideas, philosophies, theories. Primarily he was working on his reverse optical illusion works where he collapsed two-dimensional into three-dimensional forms. He discussed vision and perception, as well as his shadow series.

HANS ULRICH

Did any other mentors inspire you?

NOBUO

As far as the older generation, Natsuyuki Nakanishi was

a very influential artist for me. He was part of the Hi-Red Center, an art collective that emerged in postwar Japan between 1963 and 1964. The group collaborated with Fluxus and did happenings in the streets, throwing clothes off a roof, or collaborating with Nam June Paik and Yoko Ono during the nuclear test. They had a very eclectic way of dealing with social action, or inaction, that was inspirational for me.

HANS ULRICH

Yoko Ono told me about this movement. Now that we've talked about the beginnings, it's time to move on to your own practice. What would you call the first artwork in your catalogue raisonné? The first piece that was no longer a student work?

NOBUO

It would be the *Phase* series from 1968. I studied in the department of painting, but these works were sculptural reliefs, specifically cylinders splayed apart. If you look at one straight on, it looks flat, but then when you walk around it, it's obviously sculptural. I was very excited about this idea of topology, this mathematical theory of space and the transformative continuity of space. It was an avenue I wanted to explore.

HANS ULRICH

Your first important group exhibition was *Tricks and Vision: Stolen Eyes*, held in 1968 at Tokyo Gallery and Muramatsu Gallery in Tokyo. On that occasion you exhibited *Phase No. 4* (1968). Could you tell me about this show? What was its manifesto—if any—and what did you have in common with the other invited artists?

NOBUO

In one word, this was a very strange show. A lot of the exhibited works were not very complete, or concrete. They were angled, and there wasn't an enclosure. It was kind of continuous.

HANS ULRICH

After this, the next chapter of your practice happened, which is what I saw first. I didn't know it early on, but I've always been familiar with the iconic work *Phase—Mother Earth* (1968). This piece represented a major move in your practice, as it departed from the more colorful works. It was your first open-air sculpture, shown at the *1st Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition* at Suma Rikyu Park in Kobe, Japan. It consisted of a cylindrical hole in the ground, 270 centimeters in depth and 220 centimeters in diameter, accompanied by an adjacent cylindrical tower of earth molded into exactly the same dimensions. In an interview you described it as a “thought experiment.” Can you tell me more about this piece, which I think could be considered one of your big epiphanies? How did *Phase—Mother Earth* begin?

NOBUO

The epiphany came when I was thinking about the earth, and digging a hole completely out as if the earth became a hollow shell, and continuing to do that, and reversing the process of the earth being some kind of heavy phenomenon.

HANS ULRICH

The notion of phase, as you explained to me before, comes from topology, so it's a mathematical notion, and these are properties that are preserved under the formation. So you perceive format and space as malleable, in a way. I'm very curious to know the connection of these concepts of phase, and how, as an artist, you connect to mathematics and topology. Did you study this?

NOBUO

At that time I was studying topology on my own. I was deeply interested in this theory of space as a fundamental problem within art, and so I was looking at various disciplines: geometries, chemistry, physics. When I came upon topology, that was the theory I realized I was most interested in exploring.

HANS ULRICH

And how did you come from this radical setting to Mono-ha? I'm interested in movements, because Mono-ha was, of course, a very important group in terms of visual arts in the 1960s and 1970s in Asia. *Phase—Mother Earth* was considered the beginning of Mono-ha. How did it start?

NOBUO

The moment I felt Mono-ha had been born was when I worked on *Phase—Mother Earth* for one week with my friends, who were both assistants and artists. It was a very physical experience in terms of making the work, and when they finished, I saw the cylindrical hole, and next to it, the mass. All kinds of theories of space, metaphysics, that had accumulated in my mind went away. It was a phenomenological experience that was more about the relationality between the two forms—something completely different from the theories of topology that I had been thinking about.

HANS ULRICH

Who named Mono-ha?

NOBUO

It's a big debate. No one can pinpoint exactly who.

HANS ULRICH

When we worked on the book, Rem Koolhaas and I were intrigued by the fact that Metabolists didn't have a group manifesto. That movement was a very pragmatic alliance of architects with a shared interest in biological matters related to architecture. It was very different from Dada, Surrealism, or Gutai, where there was an ideological manifesto. Did Mono-ha have a manifesto?

NOBUO

No. But when I met Lee Ufan in 1968, we discussed the importance of creating a language for what we were doing, and so it began out of our discussions, our dialogue.

HANS ULRICH

In 1969 you had your first exhibition at Tokyo Gallery, and I think that was a very important moment, because it included key works like *Phase—Sponge* (1968). In this piece you put a steel plate on top of a sponge, and it's interesting, because as Lee Ufan said (I'm quoting from Wikipedia here), “All primitive people had to do was to stack up rocks like dolmens. However, in today's industrial society, an iron plate on a sponge cylinder more naturally elicits a response.” So, he means that it is a continuation of what primitive people used to do. Could you expand a bit on the influence of these ancients, for instance the circular stone monument of Stonehenge or other early cultures?

NOBUO

I was very interested in Lee's discussion of the ancients putting stones on top of one another. In fact, later on, I created works that were basically very large-scale outdoor sculptures. But at the time, I felt that there was something strange about contemporary artists piling up rocks, and perceived that with a stainless steel plate I could get rid of the idea of the human hand producing something. I wanted to allow this material, and the gravity of that plate, to actually press down on the sponge, have that tension. That was the shift that developed

from *Phase—Mother Earth* and allowed these materials to really work.

HANS ULRICH

The next step was *Phase of Nothingness* (1969–1970). At your 1969 solo exhibition at Tokyo Gallery you exhibited *Phase of Nothingness—Oilclay* (1969), a huge mass of oil clay in its natural state. Viewers were allowed to touch it and reshape it. After this, you were selected with Shūsaku Arakawa to represent Japan at the 35<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, in 1970, where you exhibited a large stone placed on top of a tall square column of mirrored stainless steel. To my mind, these works were basically a sort of readymade. Visitors were able to interact with your works, so there was a participatory element in *Phase of Nothingness*. Could you say more?

NOBUO

I wasn't thinking of these as readymade or found objects. As for the piece at the Venice Biennale—now at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebaek, Denmark—it wasn't my intention to use the mirror. The work was four tons of granite sitting atop stainless steel, which conveys a kind of surrealist effect like a cloud, with the mirror disappearing, but then when you get close, your body reflects in the mirror. That was something that came after, and was the effect of the piece that I was interested in.

HANS ULRICH

Starting with the water, because the water at the beginning is very quiet, but then people can touch it, and then waves happen, or just the breathing, or the sheer presence of the body, the trembling, and with the oil clay people could sculpt and change it. I am interested in this notion of participation. What's your idea of participation, the role of the viewer? Marcel Duchamp once said that the viewer does fifty percent of the work. Do you agree?

NOBUO

I didn't actively choose the materials anticipating participation, but the material itself encouraged visitors to touch it.

HANS ULRICH

So, the material invited people.

NOBUO

Yes. The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, bought *Phase—Sponge*, and kids would often want to hug the sponge. It was just a natural reaction.

HANS ULRICH

I'm curious to know if at the time you had a dialogue with other artists from your generation, perhaps those belonging to Arte Povera in Italy, or the Minimalists or Postminimalists in the United States.

NOBUO

When I was doing my Mono-ha works, I didn't have too much interaction with artists from abroad. But in Italy, I met Luciano Fabro during the Venice Biennale in 1970.

HANS ULRICH

Then, in the later part of the 1970s, another phase started, which is less known. It's called *Phase of Nothingness—Black* (1978), black sculptures. Some were rough, some were polished. They all had in common a relationship between the found (the readymade), the natural, and the human-made. Could you tell me what prompted this phase?

NOBUO

This is a difficult question. It makes me a little uncomfortable, because it's hard to explain the shift.

HANS ULRICH

What's your idea of black? What is black?

NOBUO

Black is very important for me because it's like a silhouette. It's a very clear color for a silhouette.

HANS ULRICH

What is relevant—I think—is that some of it is rough, and some is polished, which is clearly different from before, when the material was presented as it was found. I'm interested in this kind of combination of the rough and the polished, because it seems the common ground of all the black works.

NOBUO

The coexistence of rough and polished elements was inspired by Japanese gardens, which I was studying at the time, and even before then.

HANS ULRICH

What about the material? Could you talk about the fiber-reinforced plastic?

NOBUO

The impetus for the realization of *Phase of Nothingness—Black* was, actually, just pragmatic. The director of the Louisiana Museum invited me to do a series of big exhibitions in four museums, and so I had to take the shipping very practically into account given that the overall budget was quite limited. So I chose the FRP, a relatively light material that can be produced on a large scale.

HANS ULRICH

Let's talk about your unrealized projects. One very interesting one is the rocks on wheels.

NOBUO

I wasn't invited to participate at documenta 5 in 1972, curated by Harald Szeemann, but I proposed this specific series, wondering if I might be selected.

HANS ULRICH

And what about the amazing piece with rocks on the trees?

NOBUO

This was right after *Phase of Nothingness*. I was thinking more casually about various objects and sculptures that I could make after this phase.

HANS ULRICH

The stainless-steel structure with a rock on top is gigantic, as is the work with the two rocks in an act of balance. Could you tell me about these two projects? They have such a skyscraper scale.

NOBUO

Yes, the first was a drawing for a project in New York, but I was never asked to realize it. The second one, I wanted to have it at the Kremlin in Moscow. At that time, East and West had bad relations, and so I was thinking about this image.

HANS ULRICH

And this one [*pointing*], that's like an arc?

NOBUO

I wanted this one to be in Rome, but it never happened. The idea of this piece was to pile rocks until it lost gravitational balance.

HANS ULRICH

This is wonderful. Do you have some favorite realized public sculptures?

NOBUO

*Phase of Nothingness* is my favorite outdoor public project. The big granite on the stainless steel—anyone can understand it. It's very accessible.

HANS ULRICH

Any unrealized projects you dream of?

NOBUO

Yes, I would like to create a very large-scale *Phase—Mother Earth* near the Great Wall in China. Imagining that landscape, I think that's the perfect location for that piece.

HANS ULRICH

And what are you currently working on in your studio?

NOBUO

I'm making some paintings, and imagining some other 2D works.

HANS ULRICH

Beautiful. So it goes back to the beginnings.

NOBUO

Yes, it's a combination of the veneer plywood and what I call wrinkles of the canvas along the stretched slides. These are things that I cannot plan ahead. They just happen while I'm doing it. I can *try* to plan the structure, but it will naturally form. Right now, I'm interested in surface.

HANS ULRICH

How would you define nothingness?

NOBUO

It comes from Zen Buddhism, which I have been practicing and studying, and there is sutra Hannya shingyō where term nothingness comes from.

HANS ULRICH

Yes, and the nothingness is also a series you carried out in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, which is a combination of cloth and stone. It's one of your longest-running series. Where did the idea of combining cloth and stone in so many different ways come from?

NOBUO

A lot of my output was sculpture. While I was working on the Venice Biennale piece, I wanted something that was more two-dimensional, back to the wall, and that's how I started this series.

HANS ULRICH

Given your immense experience of sixty years of work, I must ask: What would be your advice to a young artist?

NOBUO

The work I'm doing now, the *Phase of Nothingness*, has made me think about something I've pondered throughout my career—namely a telepathic understanding of form. When I'm creating this, some kinds of form begin to emerge, and I would urge young artists to explore this mentality. That telepathic kind of idea.

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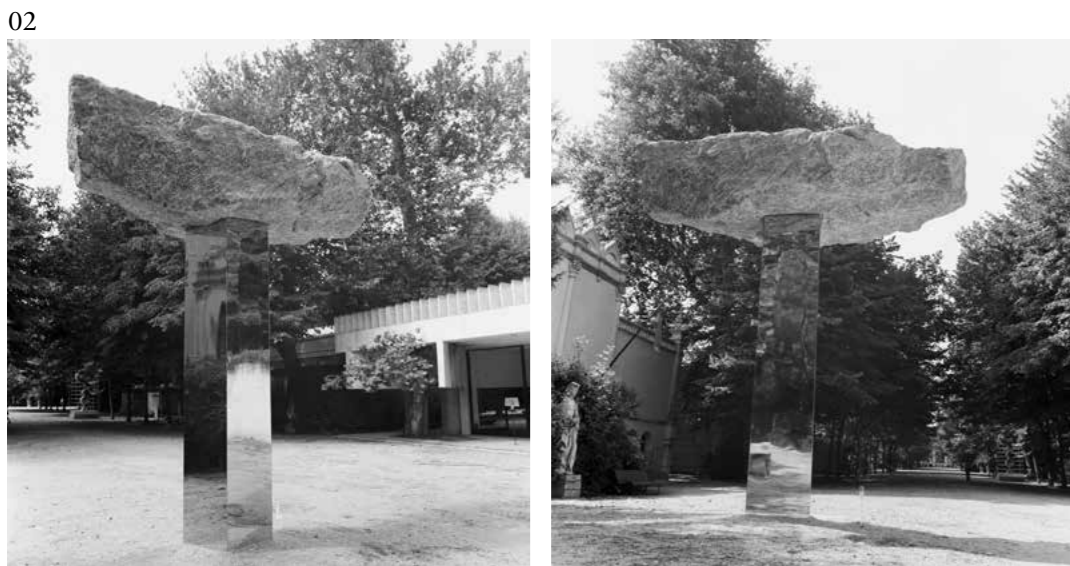




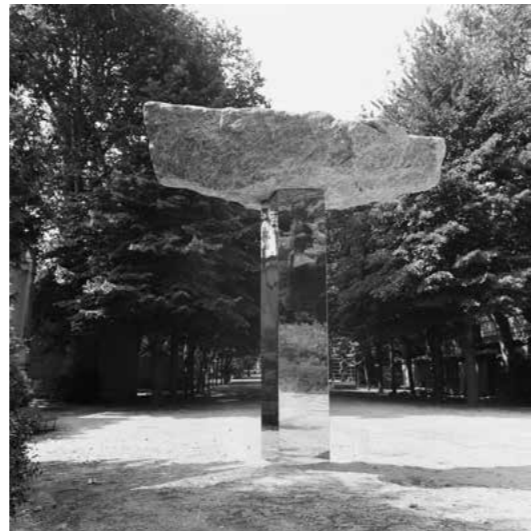
- 01 *Phase—Mother Earth* installation view at the 1<sup>st</sup> Kobe Suma Rikyū Park Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition, Kobe, 1968. © Nobuo Sekine. Photo: Osamu Murai
- 02 *Phase of Nothingness*, 1969-1970, Japanese Pavilion installation view at 35<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, Venice, 1970. © Nobuo Sekine
- 03 *Progetto*, 1971. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo
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- 08 *Nobuo Sekine: Skulptor 1975-1978* installation view at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humblebæk, 1978. © Nobuo Sekine
- 09 *Nobuo Sekine: Skulptor 1975-1978* installation view at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humblebæk, 1978. © Nobuo Sekine
- 10 *Phase of Nothingness—Water*, 1969-2012. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo. Photo: Joshua White
- 11 *Nobuo Sekine: Skulptor 1975-1978* installation view at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humblebæk, 1978. © Nobuo Sekine
- 12 *Nobuo Sekine: Skulptor 1975-1978* installation view at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humblebæk, 1978. © Nobuo Sekine
- 13 *Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha* installation view at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, 2012. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo. Photo: Joshua White
- 14 *Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha* installation view at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, 2012. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo. Photo: Joshua White
- 15 *Nobuo Sekine* installation view at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, 2014. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo. Photo: Joshua White
- 16 *Phase of Nothingness—Skin 60*, 2016. Courtesy: YOD Gallery, Osaka
- 17 *Phase of Nothingness—Skin 27*, 2016. Courtesy: YOD Gallery, Osaka
- 18 *Phase of Nothingness—Skin*, 2016. Courtesy: YOD Gallery, Osaka
- 19 *Phase of Nothingness—Skin 63*, 2016. Courtesy: YOD Gallery, Osaka
- 20 *Phase No.9*, 1968-2012. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo
- 21 *Nobuo Sekine* installation view at SOKO Tokyo Gallery, Tokyo, 1992. Courtesy: Tokyo Gallery + BTAP, Tokyo and the Nobuo Sekine Estate
- 22 Installation view at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, 2014. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo. Photo: Joshua White
- 23 *Nobuo Sekine* installation view at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, 2014. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo. Photo: Joshua White
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- 31 Installation view at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, 2014. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo. Photo: Joshua White
- 32 *Phase of Nothingness—Black No. 4*, 1978. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo
- 33 *Phase of Nothingness—Black No. 47*, 1977. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo
- 34 *Phase of Nothingness—Black No. 40*, 1978. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo
- 35 *Phase of Nothingness—Black No. 1*, 1977. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo
- 36 *Phase of Nothingness—Black No. 51*, 1978. © Nobuo Sekine. Courtesy: Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo
- 37 *Phase of Nothingness—Black*, 1978, *Nobuo Sekine: Skulptor 1975-1978* installation view at Städtische Kunsthalles Düsseldorf, 1978. © Nobuo Sekine



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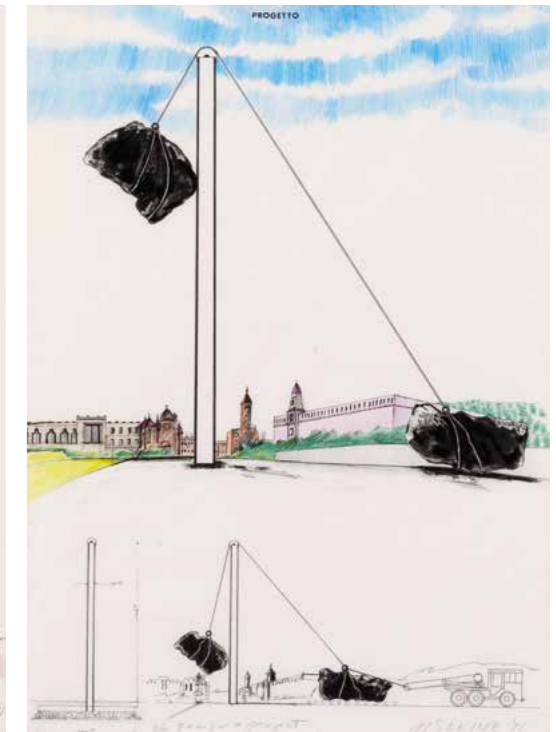
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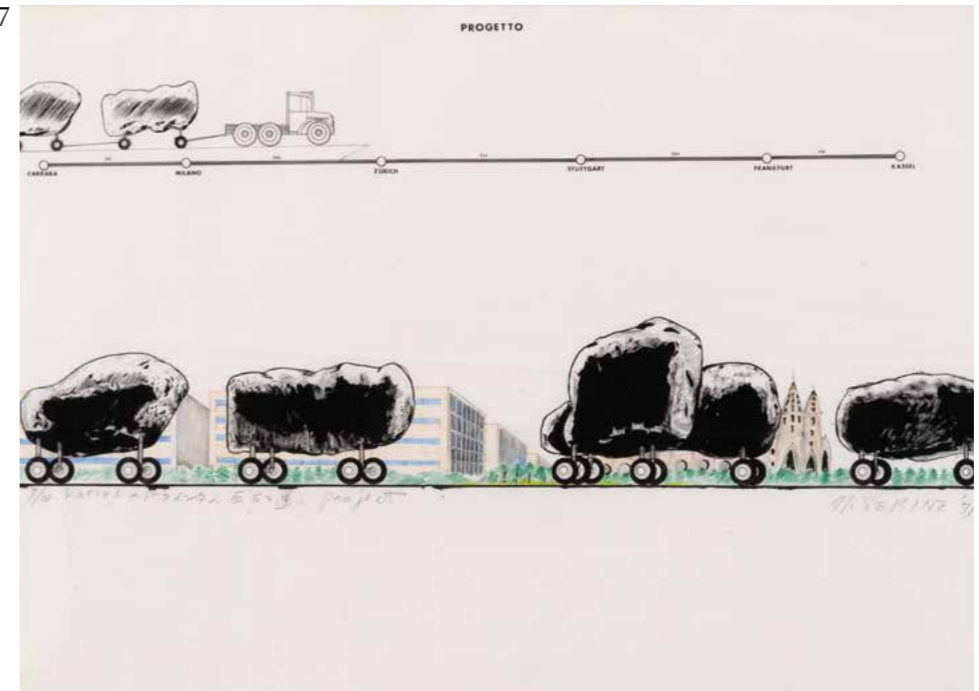


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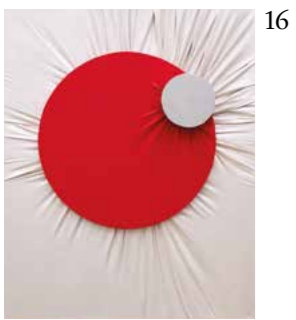
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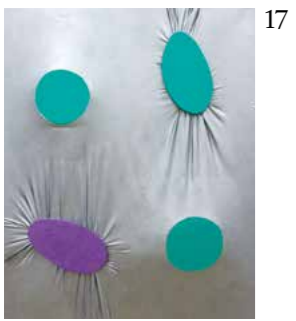


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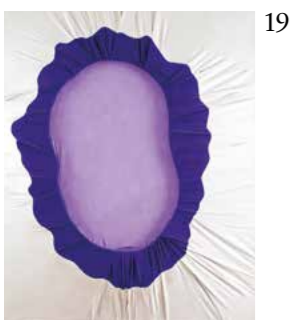
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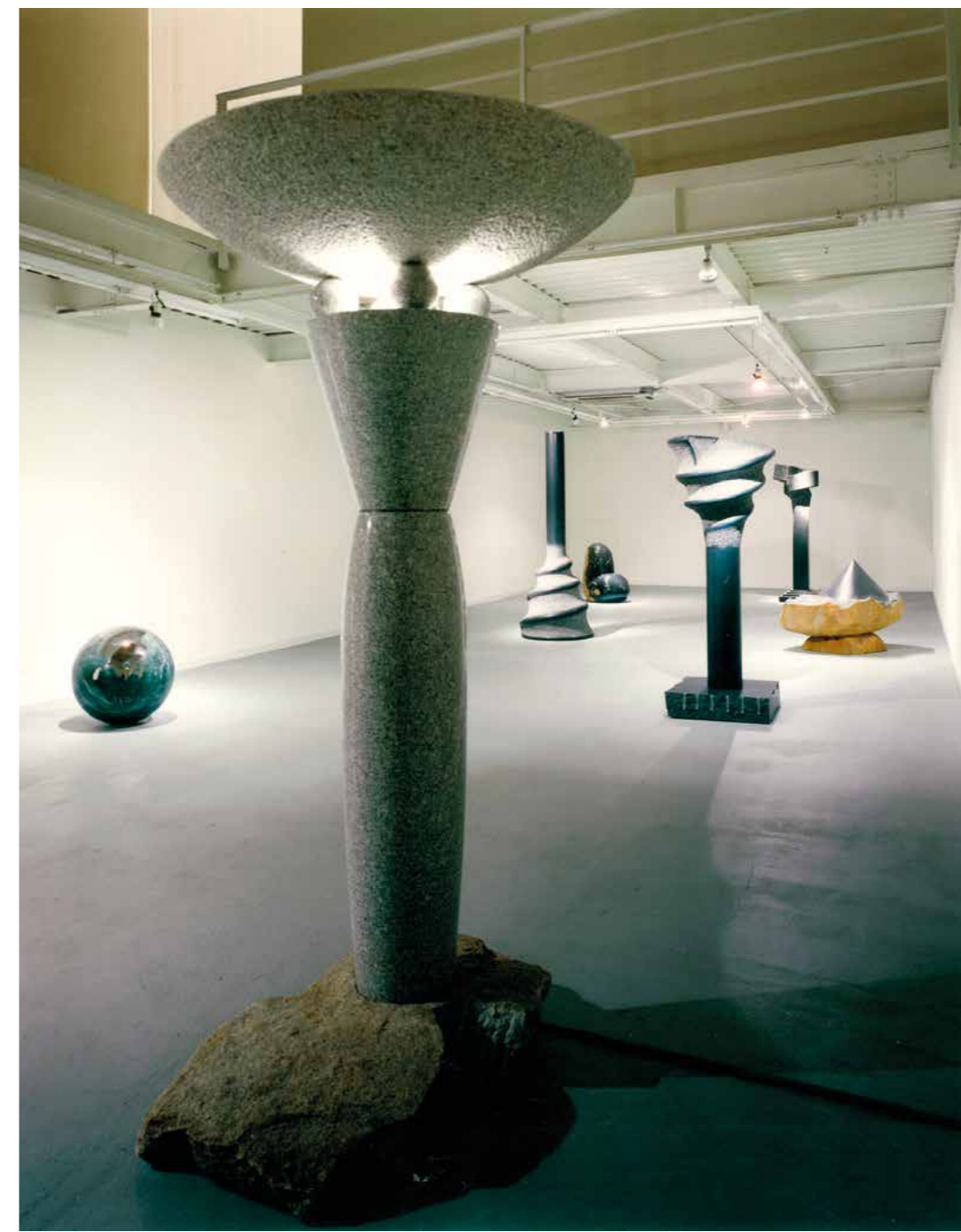


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