

On Phase of Nothingness—Oilclay

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What does *Phase of Nothingness—Oilclay* (1969), which Nobuo Sekine made when I was barely even fourteen years old, mean to me?

Although I studied under another Mono-ha figure, Kōji Enokura, when he was teaching at the Tokyo University of the Arts, I never met Sekine, who was affiliated with Tama Art University. In fact, the first time we met was at the opening of my solo exhibition at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, in 2015. I feel very unsure that I am qualified to write about him, but I hope that this text can be appreciated as the response of an artist from the generation that came after Mono-ha.

Of course, I did not see *Phase of Nothingness—Oilclay* in person when it was exhibited in 1969; I only saw it in a magazine in around 1977 to 1978, when I was a student. All I remember of that moment is the strange impression it made on me. In contrast with Sekine's signature work *Phase—Mother Earth*, this piece gave me the impression of logical consistency, and I was deeply impressed by its blunt state of material existence. At that time, I felt that works of Mono-ha, including those of Kōji Enokura, were characterized by the subtle integrity of their material aspects with their modified aspects. In other words, it was as if the "consideration" for not showing a thing as a thing was itself the subject. One could call this an "unconscious consideration" that differs from the Western, Heideggerian sense of "care."

Sekine's *Phase of Nothingness—Oilclay* emphasizes the materiality of the oilclay to the extent that one can no longer feel the "consideration without consideration" that is distinct to Mono-ha. Oilclay is commonly used in elementary school art classes. So, I was stunned by its sheer quantity and how it had been handled as if discarded.

Perhaps Sekine would deny this, but in a sense this work is also extremely expressionist. It overflows with the subjecthood of the artist who handled the oilclay. Mono-ha artists detested that kind subjecthood and expressiveness, but I feel that *Phase of Nothingness—Oilclay* is an inversion in which those characteristics come to the fore.

I started university in 1976, so I am of the generation that encountered Mono-ha during the period when it shifted from installation to painting. In other words, we did not have a direct experience of the impact of *Phase—Mother Earth*; paradoxically, what we learned about Mono-ha's philosophy of "things" and the way it influenced us came from the paintings that Mono-ha artists produced in the late 1970s.

In that context, *Phase of Nothingness—Oilclay* made a particularly strong impression as a work of installation.

What catches my attention first is how this huge quantity of oilclay has been amassed, yet it does not occupy an excessive ratio of the gallery (or onsite space) that contains it, and its violent materiality has been converted into a condition of “tranquility.” That is to say, it has shifted into making us aware of the “nothingness” of space that surrounds the oil clay, rather than the oilclay itself. (Is this a hidden “consideration without consideration”?)

The second thing that strikes me is the vividness of the unusual concentration of physical energy generated when the oilclay was being lumped together. This physical expressiveness can often be seen in my Y-shape paintings.

What the two of us have in common is this strong expressiveness. In Sekine’s work, the expressiveness is hidden within the “consideration without consideration,” and in mine, it is hidden within the Y-shape composition. At first glance they may appear expressionist, but in reality they are different.

Although I only met Sekine on three occasions since 2015, I hope that these modest thoughts on *Phase of Nothingness—Oilclay*, a work that for many years made such a strong impression on me, convey my feelings of admiration for him.

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Translated by Ashley Rawlings