

How do you see the invisible world?

I started to think about Japan since I came to the Netherlands. When I lived in Japan, I did not think about what it means to be Japanese. Experiencing different cultures, languages and customs in this country made me surprised, and curious to know about how "Japan" has built and influenced my self and my way of thinking.

I have the impression that, for Dutch photography, logic, context, and concept are crucial in making works of photography. On the other hand, Japanese photography is mostly made based on spiritual sensibilities. This tendency can be seen in education as well. These differences made me interested in the reason why Japanese photographers make their works based on mostly their sense and spirituality. This is the beginning of my theme.

I also became interested in how philosophy relates to Japanese art. Discovering the Japanese art movement Mono-ha was the reason for wanting to know about this relationship to philosophy.

'Mono-ha' refers to a group of artists who were active from the late sixties to early seventies, using both natural and man-made

materials in their work. Their aim was simply to bring 'things' together, as far as possible in an unaltered state, allowing the juxtaposed materials to speak for themselves. Hence, the artists no longer 'created' but 'rearranged' 'things' into artworks, drawing attention to the interdependent relationships between these 'things' and the space surrounding them. The aim was to challenge pre-existing perceptions of such materials and relate on a new level.

## Nobuo Sekine "Phase-Mother Earth" (1968)

Nobuo Sekine

The emergence of Mono-ha has its roots in many social, political and cultural factors of the 1960s, and to trace its origins in detail is a complicated matter. However, the moment that is most often viewed as Mono-ha's starting point came in October 1968 with Sekine's 'creation' of the work Phase – Mother Earth in Kobe's Sumarikyu Park for the First Open Air Contemporary Sculpture Exhibition. The work consisted of a hole dug into the ground, 2.7 metres deep and 2.2 metres in diameter, with the excavated earth compacted into a cylinder of exactly the same dimensions. Sekine described the moment when they removed the mould:

“Faced with this solid block of raw earth, the power of this object of reality rendered everybody speechless, and we stood there, rooted to the spot... I just wondered at the power of the convex and concave earth, the sheer physicality of it. I could feel the passing of time’s quiet emptiness...

Lee Ufan, 'Relatum' (1968)

Lee Ufan

Lee, in a similar way to Sekine, took natural materials such as stone, glass, rubber, iron plates and cotton and presented them in juxtaposition, so as to reveal the physical materiality of the work and allow the materials to establish their own relations independent of artistic intervention. Lee’s work Phenomenon and Perception B (1968), the title of which he later changed to Relatum consists of a sheet of glass that has cracked under the weight of the large stone block placed on top of it. About this work, he 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."

The name 'Mono-ha' was actually more of a label applied to the group, and its origins are as elusive as any precise definition of the movement. Usually translated rather awkwardly as 'school of things', it is a misleading name\* Mono-ha works are as much about the space and interdependent relationships between those 'things' as the 'things' themselves. Making the viewer become aware of his position in relation to the work is also something which the Mono-ha artists aimed for.

I thought about how Japanese people perceive space. Mono-ha artists place objects in order to emphasize the space and the relation between the space and the objects.

Therefore, the objects themselves are not as important as the space.

They intentionally use materials which are simple, raw and unprocessed, and do not modify them when they are installed. In this way, the materials function as a device which stimulates viewers to be aware of, and concentrate on, the space.

I thought that these works are devices to make viewers conscious of space.

In contrast, the earth works and land art that gained popularity, mainly in the U.S., at around the same time that Mono-ha artists were active adopted a gaze quite different from that of Mono-ha. Although they took the form of anti-art projects actually created in the natural world, it is noticeable that artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer used forests, mountain rivers, earth, deserts and other natural objects themselves as raw materials and subjects for their artworks. In other words, they created sculptures which are directly related to the environment itself. The attempt to expand the possibility of art by using materials would not fit in a museum.

In the sense that their emphasis was on

sculpture or objects itself, it can be said that they are quite different from Mono-ha. Land artists' purpose of using natural material and landscapes was to expand the possibility of sculpture, while Mono-ha artists who used similar materials were doing so in order to make viewers aware of their consciousness.

When I realized this difference, one thing occurred to me: the process by which philosophy and knowledge is formed.

In Western culture, education used to not be divided as it is now. At that time, a single person covered several different studies. For instance, Aristotle made huge achievements in philosophy, physics and politics. It was only much later that those subjects would be studied separately. On the other hand, in the East, the study of philosophy focused on the mind from the beginning.

Western philosophy is directed towards your understanding the world, while Eastern philosophy is directed towards an understanding of the subject "you" looking at the world. Lee Ufan has reflected on the completely different starting points between Western and Eastern philosophies.

Lee Ufan describes the creative process of the artist as [aiming not to turn the world into an

object of recognition like an object, but to free it into the midst of non-objective phenomena (the level of perception), or in other words to "world" the world. Might not the encounters that arise when natural rock and something artificial like a sheet of steel are placed in a certain space, the vibrations in this space, be perceived via the same sensibility as that which "sees" nature in the form of invisible phenomena and spirituality via the tactile sensation? "If viewing is encountering the world, then viewing that non-objective space is in a sense an intuitive and perceptive experience of the thickness and depth of this world of encounters. In addition, Lee's statement that "an encounter is not a confrontation with an object, but the perception of identifying with it by viewing it egolessly amidst such an expanse.

We can see the world between things and space. It is the same concept of [Kare-san-sui], which refers to the traditional dry landscape garden which is Zen Buddhism.

They said "We can see the universe between stone and space." "Kare-san-sui," made of only rock and sand, is very different from other Japanese style gardens. "Kare-san-sui" doesn't use water, which is why it is called a dry landscape garden. Its purpose is to see

the universe by an extreme simplification of things.

But what is this meaning of the universe? I thought it indicate [Sa-to-ri] which is ultimate concept of Buddhism. It is difficult to describe "satori" in words. According to Zen, it is something you "feel" without words. "Satori" is a sort of bodily sensation, something you understand without words. "Satori" is a spiritual awakening, reaching a state of "Muga," which is a perfect self-effacement. What is actually "Muga," and "me"?

When we encounter an event, we react to it and that triggers us to have feelings and emotions. It is the existence of an 'I' that creates this consciousness. In neuroscience, the brain is simply an aggregate of neurons. It is like a machine where neurons are exchanging and dealing with information. However, the mechanism of how the brain creates the consciousness of an 'I' is still unexplained.

In 1994, an Australian philosopher, David Jon Chalmers, pointed out that neuroscience has only been studying the functions of the brain, and that this study does not lead us to understand how the brain creates the consciousness of an 'I'. In other words, the existence of an 'I' cannot be explained even



scientifically.

We receive events as they are, and identify the reaction as consciousness. Experiencing those process leads you to the state of "Muga" where you find out there is no consciousness of an "I" at all. That is to say, "Satori". Primarily an 'I' has nothing to do with a matter of consciousness, and "Satori" is about understanding it. However, in the eastern philosophy, knowing something by theory does not mean that you understand it. To understand, it suggests "Zazen", which is the only practice of experiencing it.

Here is an anecdotal example:

There was an ascetic monk asked Zen master, 'What is "Satori"?' The master replied, 'You have reached "Satori" when you no longer ask the question'.

I see this anecdote as a root of Japanese culture. It shows that the existence of "Satori" is not reached through words. It could be also said there is unknown existence, like air, which dominates the place.

The reason why you can not feel the universe might be that your mind is not mature enough

to "see" it. Thus, to feel the vibration wafting around the space is to understand in a Japanese way: to understand by looking at something invisible, to understand the state which can not be described by words. For Mono-ha artists, the physical presence of the work itself is less important than the process by which their works make viewers aware of space and trigger their inner thoughts.

Ze-a-mi, who originated Japanese Noh theater, said, "If it is hidden, it is the flower. If it is not hidden, it is not the flower". This means it is not important to show, but this not-showing gives the spectator room to imagine. In a way, this process makes the thing complete.

I have explained how eastern philosophy influenced Japanese art by introducing some works. I thought I could also explain how this philosophy has influenced Japanese photographers in the same way. I was wondering which works would be most appropriate to explain this influence. However I discovered a huge influence of Eastern philosophy in the act of making photography. I would like to introduce the experience of studying photography in Japan and some interviews of Japanese photographers as

references.

I want make myself less present. The less you see of "myself" in the photos I take, the better they become. Rinko Kawauchi

Eventually I would like to take photographs where my "presence" disappears. I would like these photographs to be taken by the camera itself. This might sound contradictory, but it would be ideal. Risaku Suzuki

I cannot explain my works with words. I don't want photographs which can be explained in a few words. I can easily take photos as the way I want. However, photographs out of the way I would plan are better. Takashi Homma

The common thread here is that the photographs without the photographer's presence are better. Even though, of course, they have to take decisions and choose to what to take (which makes this discourse somewhat paradoxical) you can see the influence from Eastern philosophy in their attempt to reduce their presence in their photographs.

I am going to elaborate on the common attitude of Japanese photographers. They don't really think about what exactly they should take. They just start taking, then print

the photographs and put them on a wall. They observe and analyze: "What exactly did I want to take? What would it be the reason for taking this picture?" They gradually understand what they want, and it becomes a series.

The attitude of Japanese photographers feels as if it is the "Zazen" in Zen. They take photos, and deeply think about them. Again, they take photos. The goal is to let their own presence disappear. To reach the state of taking photographs in this way, they keep taking photos. In other words, an "I" takes photos to delete the presence of this "I" within them.

In Zen, the first step to the state of "Satori" is to be aware of "Now, here". It is important to make sure that you have the awareness of "I only exist here and now". Certainly, photography is the medium of "Now, here". It is said that Japanese photography has developed in its own way. Perhaps this is because photography is the best medium to express the concept of "Satori".

Japanese artists always try to express "something" which can not be expressed by words. Even though the artists create, for instance, photography, painting,

sculpture and video, they can not express this "something" properly. This "something" always refuses to be put in words; it expresses something which cannot take an objective form. All we see is a trace of the artist's failure to express this "something". Viewers look at the trace and try to feel this "something" from artist's perspective.

This is the roles of artists and viewers: trying to see something which is not visible. It exists as an unwritten rule. Artists keep on making works and viewers attempt to feel "something". When the viewers can not feel "something", it is not because of the works but because of a lack of ability in the viewers to look and feel. Looking at an artwork with such pressure is also one way to "look at things which are invisible".

When we look at works, we are being tested and watched by the work itself. This feeling may change the value of art to something sublime. Artworks work out as artworks in between the artist--expressing a "something" that they don't understand--and viewers--who feel the pressure of being tested about whether they themselves understand this "thing".