

Kishio Suga, *Law of Peripheral Units*,  
1997/2014,  
steel pipe, stone, rope,  
300 x 1720 x 1110 cm  
Installation view,  
Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum, 2014  
Courtesy Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum  
Photo by Kenji Takahashi

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Interview 4

# KISHIO SUGA

## From "Presence" to "Existence"

Interview by Keisuke Mori

“Art is, after all, process. However complete something may seem, it is always nothing but a process.”

*Mono-ha (School of Things) is an art movement of the late 1960s and one of the most important in postwar Japan. Kishio Suga is a key figure of this movement who, for more than half a century until today, has consistently employed unprocessed natural objects or industrial building materials to deepen his inquiry into the existence of mono, or things. With his major retrospective exhibitions in Japan in 2014 and 2015, as well as the burgeoning international acclaim show, there seems to be a rising interest in mono. Why look at mono now? In this interview, the artist looks back at the process in which art underwent a major transformation in the late 1960s, from the standpoint of today.*

### The Particularization of Mono

—Mono-ha refers to the series of trends from the late 1960s onwards in which *mono*, such as natural objects like wood and stone and industrial building materials, were used in their unaltered state as

protagonists of a work instead of mere materials. You graduated from Tama Art University in 1968. What were your thoughts on *mono* at the time, when you had just begun producing your own works?

**KS:** At the time, there were hardly any established artistic approaches as to how to deal with unprocessed materials. I too started with painting. But painting always prompted a doubt; was it necessary to undergo the process of perceiving a certain landscape, to then consciously dismantle it and re-assemble it, so that a distorted image could be produced? It seemed to me far more compelling to present what is seen, without manipulating it in any way. A strong connection is unavoidably forged between a *mono* and the person who presents it, and that in itself invests the piece with the

certain particularity required of an artwork. In addition, *mono* do not exist in a way that is solely to our liking, and there are of course some aspects that we feel dissatisfied with. That is the reality of *mono*. So one position artists adopted was to retain such aspects of imperfection in an attempt to discern the very existence of *mono*. For me in particular, thinking about the ontology of *mono*, about what *mono* really are, was important.

—In 1968, the “Tricks and Vision” exhibition was held in Tokyo. This exhibition is generally understood to be one in which optically illusory effects, such as the *trompe l’oeil*, were pushed to the fore. A work that is now known as something of a monument to Mono-ha, Nobuo Sekine’s *Phase—Mother Earth* (1968), was also conceived as a thought



Kishio Suga at his studio in Ito, Shizuoka. Photo by Kaori Nishida





*Separating Dependence*, 1973/2015, zinc plate, stone, cement block, pipe, 415 x 1026 x 568 cm  
Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo, 2015  
Photo by Tsuyoshi Satoh

**experiment in topology.**

**KS:** Around 1967 to 1968, there was a large influx of American art dealing with images and human perception, as exemplified by Pop art and Op art. It was about optical illusions, so works would focus not on what is seen in reality, but on overturning it, or even replacing it. This, I believe, is one course of response in a period of transition. The art world persisted for a long time without the human act of painting being questioned, but artists in Japan, each in their own way, detected from such forms of expression that it would no longer suffice to present one's own worldview. The "Tricks and Vision" exhibition brought together many disciplines such as topology and geometry. There was also encouragement from people like Yoshishige Saito who taught at Tama Art University. I believe that Mono-ha would not have come in to being without such backgrounds. On the other hand, there was also the problem of "actuality." The introduction of performance art from America showed us that the human action could take center stage in art. It became important to think about what kind of changes occur when actions are coupled or confronted with *mono*. I dealt with this by consciously treating this confrontation as an "event," and my practice has since then revolved around simultaneously presenting my actions within the works in a circumstantial manner, while also allowing the very actions to become an artwork. —You produced works at a time when the relationship between the artist and the work was being newly rearticulated, with artists negating authorship in terms of image manipulation, while introducing actions into their vocabulary. The "events" you mentioned are something you began working on in

1973, and after 2004, you have been referring to them as "activations." I now see that these works dealt with the relationship between the agent and the *mono*.

**From Being to Non-being**

—In the past, you stated that a person who acts is also a *mono*. How did you arrive at this notion that things and people are to be regarded as equivalent?

**KS:** Human beings are *mono* just like stones and wood are *mono*. It is impossible to distinguish them in any essential manner. A *mono* is a manifestation so it can pass out of existence. Human beings die just like wood decays or burns and then vanishes. They go through the same process. In other words, they go from a state of being [*yu*] to non-being [*mu*]. *Mono* exist in the midst of these states. So it is absolutely impossible for people to treat *mono* as a solely human problem. That would amount to perceiving *mono* exclusively within the dimensions and cycles peculiar to people. A change in *mono* pertains to a change into a state of non-being.

—The term non-being is reminiscent of the concept of emptiness [*ku*] in Eastern philosophy and Buddhism. In the past, you have mentioned texts such as the Buddhist commentaries *Abhidharma* and *Middle Treatise*, as well as philosophers such as Keiji Nishitani.

**KS:** Nishitani wrote a book called *Religion and Nothingness* (1961), and it explored the concept of being in relation to *mono*. This book proved to be a revelation for me. It made me realize that it is possible to talk about *mono*. I came to realize that all the *mono* in this world may exist not merely as materials for the artist, but in an universal manner within a certain frame.

—At the time, Lee Ufan focused on negating images and representations, and criticized the production of art from the standpoint of the modern subject in his quest to overcome the West. In this regard, we can see theoretical contiguities with your practice. However, in your 1970 text "Existence Beyond Condition," you talk about the shift from being [*aru* 有る] to existing [*aru* 在る], and introduce the term dependence [*izon*]. Such unique thinking has formed the basis of your works.

**“All goes through the same process. They go from a state of being to non-being. Mono exist in the midst of these states.”**

**KS:** The reason why I used the term dependence is because I believe that a place [*ba*] that we see or perceive does not exist independently. For *mono* to come into effect, there must always be other *mono* that emanate a certain reality, regardless of their form or the distance between them. They are always somehow connected and give rise to the conditions of that reality. I believe that a place could always arise as long as there is an object, and that this place connects with other places *ad infinitum*. As such, all places are supported by other places, and in just the same way, all *mono* in a place are also supported and connected with other *mono*. That is how I regard spaces and places. I do not focus on one object when making a work, but rather shift my view to see the countless *mono* that exist so that I may capture them all.

—This appears to relate to the Buddhist concept of dependent origination [*engi*], a worldview where everything is inextricably connected.

**KS:** Yes. In Buddhism there is another concept related to dependent origination, which is non-existence [*muji-sei*]. Non-existence refers to the lack of an autonomous existence. In other words, nothing arises on its own. These lead to the concept of emptiness [*ku*]. It is about self-existence changing into emptiness precisely because everything is

connected. Nothing can be exempt from this and exist independently.

**Connecting Multiple Places**

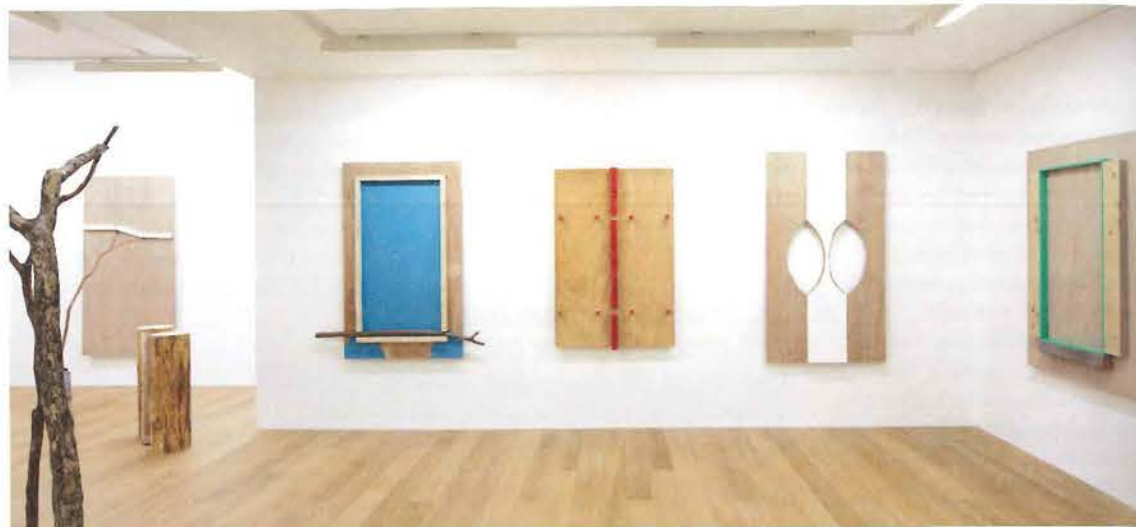
—You produced a series of outdoor works from 1968 to 1977 referred to as "fieldwork". In your 1971 text "The Condition of Being Released," you wrote about released [*houchi*] situations in the outdoors in reference to those works. In your exhibition at the Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum (2014–2015), you recreated *Law of Immutability*, a work you first produced in 1974 as part of the "fieldwork" for the first time in 40 years.

**KS:** I simply took some stones I found outside of the museum, put them in transparent plastic bags and then returned them, that's it. It really is just that. But stones



*Law of Immutability*, 1974/2014, vinyl, stone, dimensions variable  
Installation view, Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum, 2014  
Courtesy Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum.  
Photo by Kenji Takahashi





Installation view of "Kishio Suga: Intentional Scenic Space" at Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo, 2015  
Courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo. Photo by Kenji Takahashi

are not really meant to be covered, are they? For me it was important that it became difficult to see the stones because of the cover.

—You seem to deal with the question of how to make the reality of *mono* manifest by combining different materials in order to emphasize their characteristics or by hiding them precisely in order to reveal their existence. I feel you employ a unique rhetoric in the way you combine *mono*.

**KS:** These kinds of things may only occur to me. There is something that a *mono* emanates when it is placed somewhere. We should never treat *mono* relying exclusively on human logic.

—You must have been aware of the Earthworks movement as represented by artists such as Robert Smithson. What were your thoughts about producing artworks in a natural environment?

**KS:** The external poses the problem of geographical space, and it is also recognized in opposition to the internal. Internal problems can be dealt with within the scope of our thinking, but it is difficult to introduce the external. But we must strive to include both. Stones are constituents of the external, and the question of how to assimilate them has in itself a formative value. So I spend a lot of time thinking about what kind of geographical spaces there are, and through what kind of relationships natural spaces arise. Natural space comes into effect through continuity, circumstantiality, and heterogeneity. I also ask myself what kind of space

human beings carry with them. If we were to suppose that people carry a certain imaginary space with them, how could we substantiate it, and conversely, how could we make a substantial space into a heterogeneous one using different materials? Natural or geographical spaces and artificial spaces—how do we connect these multiple places? I believe the answer to these questions can allow for something that has creative value.

—In your "fieldwork" series, the intervention of the artist into nature resulted in certain conceptual forms. You mentioned that *mono* and situations cannot be dissociated, so by bringing natural objects into museums, were you attempting to bring together two different places?

**KS:** That is exactly it. Taking something to a different place causes a hole to open up in its original place. However, a different meaning comes to occupy that hole. Natural space is infinite but the museums or galleries are not. One must always bear in mind such differences in finite and infinite space. It's absurd not to.

### Rethinking Human Systematization

—Most of the works of Mono-ha no longer exist, making the fact that you continue to produce works rather important. You have been critical of the institution of the museum, which functions on the premise of a finished work, and take the stance that an artwork is never completed. What are your thoughts on creating works many times in

accordance to the place, instead of re-producing for archiving purposes?

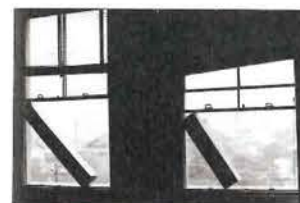
**KS:** In 1970, I placed a piece of timber on the window frame at the National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto. What I was exploring was the notion that man-built architecture could also be a material and not just a container. A window frame is a characteristic framing system found in architectural structures. It sets a certain limit. By undermining such criteria, I was trying to put a halt to the systematization conceived by people. Another point would be that since architecture is a structure that creates an interior, one is clearly conscious of the separation between the interior and the exterior when looking out from the inside. That is why I opened the window to let the air through. It was necessary for me that the interiors were filled with free-flowing air just like in the exterior, instead of being tightly shut. It is perhaps a question of how to break boundaries. In this case, violating the boundaries diminished the role of the architecture. When we perceive a *mono* there is always a boundary, which we also call form, and looking at the form first to then delve into its interiors is one way to recognize its existence. I wanted to rethink this notion.

—So you create your works on location because situations and the architecture are important elements for you. You have spent nearly half a century reflecting on *mono*. Could you tell us about what you are focusing on at the moment?

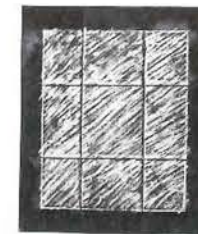
**KS:** I continue to think about how *mono* come into existence. In doing so, I believe it is important to take an approach of dealing with them in a flat manner, revealing a different aspect only through small changes. Another thing is to adopt a viewpoint that sees nature as being permeated with *mono*, which exist individually in their own way. A key facet of my consciousness as I create my works is the question; how may *mono* permeate a space whilst each retaining their own reality? In my attempts to attain such a situation, I am constantly faced with ever more elusive details as the reality of *mono* move out of line. It is precisely this process of clarifying what is unclear which constitutes the process of creating a *mono*. But *mono* indeed proceed on their course of disappearance. I will, of course, disappear too. There is no choice but to move forward accepting change. Art is, after all, process. However complete something may seem, it is always nothing but a process. ☺

## KISHIO SUGA

### Works



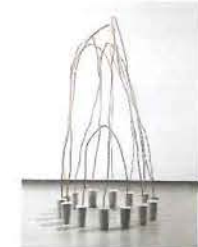
**Infinite Situation, 1970**  
Installation view, National Museum of Modern Art, Kyoto.  
Photo by the artist



**Situation of Boundary, 1971**  
Courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery



**Conjoined Bodies-T, 1985**  
Installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.  
Photo by Tsuyoshi Satoh



**Connected Space - Earth, 2010**  
Courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo. Photo by Ikuhiro Watanabe

### Biography

- 1944 + Born in Morioka, Iwate, Japan
- 1968 + Graduated from Tama Art University, School of Painting
- 1973 + Included in the 8th Biennale de Paris
- 1978 + Represented Japan at the 38th Venice Biennale
- 1986 + Group show "Japanese Avant-Garde 1910-1970" at Centre Pompidou, Paris
- 1994 + Group show "Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky" at Yokohama Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum, NY and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
- 2000 + Published novel *Across the Sea, Birds Cry*
- 2005 + Group show "Reconsidering Mono-ha" at The National Museum of Art, Osaka
- 2008 + Kishio Suga Souko Museum opened at Itamuro Onsen Daikokuya, Tochigi. Published novel *Juka Soen*
- 2009 + Associate professor at Kanazawa College of Art (~2014)
- 2012 + Group show "Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha" at Blum & Poe, LA
- 2014 + Solo show at Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum
- 2015 + Solo show at Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo

\*Recently he had solo exhibitions at Tomio Koyama Gallery (Tokyo, 2015), Blum & Poe (New York, 2015), Blain|Southern (London, 2015). A two person show with Robert Morris is being held at Blum & Poe, Tokyo (~May 7). He is preparing solo shows at the Hangar Bicocca in Milan, and group shows in Rio de Janeiro and London.



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