Nettleton, Taro. “Kishio Suga.” *ArtReview Asia* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2016): 50-55.

Kishio Suga

by Taro Nettleton

Recent work by the Japanese artist suggests a way of rethinking the legacy of Mono-ha and connecting it to some of the most pressing issues of today

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above *Left-Behind Situation*, 1972/2012,
wood, stone, steel, wire rope, 152 × 596 × 789 cm overall

facing page *Law of Multitude*, 1975/2012,
plastic sheet, stone, concrete, 84 × 655 × 887 cm overall

both images Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, New York & Tokyo

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Born in 1944 in Morioka, Iwate Prefecture, Kishio Suga is one of the most important artists of postwar Japan and a leading proponent of the Mono-ha (literally 'school of things') movement of the late 1960s and 70s, which has received increasingly international critical and market attention. In addition to Suga's art, Mono-ha has been used to describe the work of artists Nobuo Sekine, Shingo Honda, Katsuhiko Narita, Katsurō Yoshida, Susumu Koshimizu and Lee Ufan, who used natural and manmade materials, in relatively unprocessed states, to reveal the essence of 'things'. Minimally altered materials make Mono-ha works simple in appearance, yet difficult to fathom in terms of what the 'essence' they manifest might be. As often noted by the artist himself, Suga's works too are frequently characterised as difficult to understand. This difficulty is primarily a product of the gap between, on the one hand, the seeming ease of the works (a result of something that might be called the artist's grace) – Suga's most oft employed strategies include juxtaposition and *houchi*, or 'abandonment' of materials – and, on the other, the density of the artist's own writings regarding his work and process.

His most representative historical works, such as those included in his retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOT), Tokyo, last year, tend to be large-scale installations. Take, for example, *Law of Multitude*, a work first exhibited in 1975. A room in the museum is filled with concrete pedestals placed roughly equidistant from each other. A stone is placed atop each pedestal with a single large sheet of vinyl encompassing the entire space sandwiched waterlike between the stones and pedestals.

Here is Suga's description of his practice at the time the work was made: 'The early 1970s was a period in which I consciously recreated the world and recalibrated the state in which "mono" depended upon each other. In terms of production, my efforts were focused on removing the conventional concept of recognition associated with a "mono" that I intended to use, and placed it in a state of namelessness so that it may acquire a reality within the present.'

And below, MOT chief curator Yuko Hasegawa's explanation, which follows a warning against unquestioningly applying his writings to his works: 'Suga's *sozaishugi* (his ideas of elemental existentialism) is not simple existentialism – while his stance toward existence is straightforward, his ideas are based on an extremely sophisticated cognizance. It is a zen-like, philosophical cognizance that explores the furthermost depths of existence, transcending the physical existence of its objects.'

But how do we access this 'sophisticated zen-like cognizance' through his works? Moreover, how might we square the artist's emphasis on the reality of 'mono' with the 'sophisticated cognizance' that transcends the objects' existence? Much of the writing on Suga's works, and on Mono-ha, the vocabulary of which Suga has continued to work with since the 1960s, is variously metaphysical, philosophical and spiritual. Suga's focus, however, on 'removing the conventional concept of recognition associated with a "mono"' also has much more practical and political implications, which relate to Mono-ha's fundamental interest in moving away from the subject in its relation to creation, expression and representation. While the idea of an art movement devoted to refraining from making 'art' and instead expressing some internal and impermanent condition already presents great difficulty to the mind accustomed to a Western, modernist mode of thought, it is easier to understand this attitude contextualised as a critique of anthropocentrism.

Given that Mono-ha, like Gutai, which preceded it, is now being reevaluated in the Western world as a part of its project to complicate its idea of Modernism and to account for its multiplicity, in both chronologies and sites, it is important to refrain from drawing easy parallels to Western counterparts. At the same time, describing the work too hastily in nativist terms is also reductive and risky for its potential to exoticise.

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Suga's two 2015 exhibitions with Tomio Koyama Gallery in Tokyo comprised new works produced in 2014 and 2015. That same year, in addition to the MOT show, he was the subject of a major retrospective at the Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum in Shizuoka. The simultaneity of these shows reveals the interest in and urgency for reconsidering Suga's works today.

On a purely formal and stylistic level, a resurgence of interest in the idioms of Arte Povera and scatter art does suggest a fresh framework for considering Suga's practice. And at odds with the perceived recalcitrance of his historical works, there is something very playful, and even humorous, about Suga's new output. In part, these works feel more accessible due to the flatly applied bright colours that the artist has deployed since the early 2000s (marking a significant shift in his oeuvre). The works also tend to be smaller and hung on the wall. In the 48×35 cm *Circuit in Space* (2014), for example, a wooden frame mounted on an otherwise untreated sheet of wood encloses a painted blue rectangle. In a slight visual pun, the bottom right corner of the frame is opened by a rock, and the blue rectangle appears to have spilled out to the bottom right edge of the wooden support. And yet the lightness and humour, evident in his latest offerings, have tended to be obscured by the heady language used to discuss his works in the past.

Theoretically, what makes Suga's works – both the historical and the new – feel so contemporary is their embodiment and articulation of contingency. As his project starts by questioning the privileging of a subject as an agent that uses 'mono' – things – as materials to be shaped into works that articulate the subject's perspective, it questions the coherence of both subject and object, and treats them as radically contingent. Moreover, the production of 'situations' brings 'mono' and space and the human viewer into new relations that make previously unseen and unnoticed characteristics of all three manifest.

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To avoid thinking in terms of a subject that precedes its materials, it is helpful to draw from philosopher Bruno Latour's idea of the 'actant', which he defines in *Politics of Nature* (2004) as any entity, both human and nonhuman, that modifies another entity. 'Their competence', he argues, 'is deduced from their performances.' In Suga's works as well, the 'competence' of 'mono' cannot be known a priori, but must be deduced from its performance. This is precisely why trial and error are such central components of his practice. Moreover, Latour's 'actant' brings out the sense that Suga's live performances, which he has staged outside of gallery and museum spaces since the 1970s and referred to as 'activation', are not intended to underscore the role of the artist in activating.

Intentional Scenic Space, 2015 (installation view).
Photo: Kenji Takahashi. © the artist. Courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo

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above *Circuit in Space*, 2014, wood, stone, acrylic, 48 × 35 × 10 cm.
Photo: Kenji Takahashi. © the artist. Courtesy Tomio Koyama Gallery, Tokyo

facing page *Kairitsu (Space-Order)*, 1974, silver gelatin print, five parts: 53 × 36 cm each.
Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, New York & Tokyo

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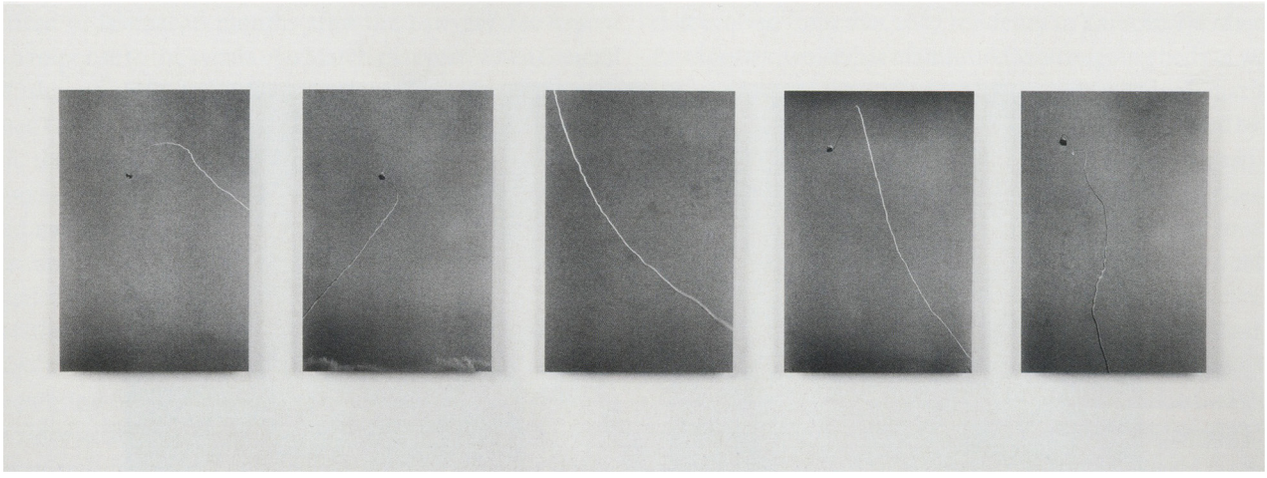

In fact, the artist and audience are reciprocally activated by the situation resulting from Suga's actions. The artist is not purely active, and the material is not purely passive.

In what sense might we consider the activation documented in his black-and-white photographic series *Kairitsu (Space-Order)* (1974)? Given the importance of experimentation in Suga's works, it may be useful to consider his practice in relation to a contemporaneously produced work by a very different artist: John Baldessari's *Throwing Four Balls in the Air to Get a Square* (1972–3).

In *Kairitsu*, Suga, pointing his camera to the sky, captures a line drawn by a rope as it's thrown into the air tied to a rock. The highly contrasted print resembles a quickly drawn ink line on paper. Like Baldessari's colour photographs documenting the titular action, Suga's work humorously and playfully critiques the artist's intention and exertion of control. In both artists' works, the same action is repeated to produce differing results. Importantly, the absurdity of the labour invested in trying to achieve the arbitrary goal of creating a square and the element of failure make Baldessari's work funny. In contrast, there is no preestablished goal in Suga's work. Viewed in relation to Baldessari's piece, Suga's work *does* indicate, however, the importance of humour and play in the contingency and radical openness articulated through his oeuvre. The precarious balance struck in many of the historical works, such as *Shachi Jokyo (Left-Behind Situation)* (1972), in which numerous wires are strung across each other between the walls of a room with variously shaped pieces of wood balanced on them, also expresses a sense of improvisation and impermanence.

Suga's works resonate so strongly with us today because he treats both things and people seriously as actants in 'situations', in the artist's words (and 'trials', in Latour's), the outcomes of which cannot be known in advance. This philosophy of advocating, in a sense, that things too are alive, is extremely relevant to our contemporary concerns. As Jane Bennett writes, drawing from Latour, in *Vibrant Matter* (2010): 'The image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies.'

> Suga captures a line drawn by a rope as it's thrown into the air tied to a rock

Perhaps the exposure of Suga's more recent output can occasion a reframing of his oeuvre in a truly materialist, rather than spiritual, context to recover the openness and contingency of this important body of work, which has otherwise been couched in obdurate language that has rendered it hermetically sealed. Through the newer works, we might recover the sense of play and vibrancy of objects in an oeuvre that is too often seen as solemn. Looking back to the 1970s photographic documentation of his modest and often humorous outdoor activations, one can see the liveliness of the inanimate has been there all along, but that it's also better articulated inside the gallery through the newer, smaller, brightly coloured works than by their historic, larger and more austere counterparts. **ara**

A two-person exhibition featuring work by Kishio Suga and Robert Morris is on view at Blum & Poe, Tokyo, through 7 May