

KISHIO SUGA

Museum of Contemporary Art
Tokyo

In principle, the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo's (MOT) recent exhibition of the Mono-ha artist Kishio Suga, entitled 'Situating Latency', was a timely proposition. Suga is one of the leading exponents of an art movement that bridges postwar avant-garde and contemporary practices in Japan and, more than a decade after a flurry of local museum exhibitions in the late 1990s, is attracting renewed international critical attention. Suga's work certainly deserves institutional reappraisal, but this exhibition may have been undone by its own acute timeliness.

While, in recent years, MOT has often dedicated multiple levels of the museum to its major shows, 'Situating Latency' was squeezed onto one floor. This was a shame, because Suga's works, which are predicated on spatial relationships, need room for elaboration. Though the exhibition did include a generous digital display of the artist's notebooks from the 1960s and '70s, it was difficult to craft a narrative out of what mainly amounted to ten large-scale installations spanning 1969 to the present. The curators, led by MOT's Chief Curator Yuko Hasegawa, seemed caught between pursuing historical contextualization and mounting a one-off project. Moreover, with many of Suga's installations originally conceived for specific gallery spaces, their sequence in the museum, where the architecture is geared toward circulation, gave visitors the sense of progressing through a three-dimensional slide show.

The installation *Separating Dependence*, first presented in 1973 at Satou Gallery in Tokyo, was a case in point. In an example of Suga's philosophy of *houchi* (roughly, 'leaving' or 'abandonment'), paper-thin sheets of burnished zinc plate were placed flat on the floor and bent at right angles along the edges to create a large rectangular bed, inside of which were arranged rocks and cement blocks, with long metal pipes stretching from rock to block, or at angles extending from the zinc plates to the tops of the gallery walls. The proportions of the 'bed', the arrangement of the rocks and the long frontal view immediately evoked the famous Zen garden at Ryōan-ji in Kyoto. Here, however, the work could only be viewed from an area that doubled as a corridor, and the effect of 'immanence' Suga was pursuing (as described in a nearby wall text) was lost as the work veered into the realm of tableau.

Of course, for those who have experienced Suga's works primarily through documentary images (such as those by Shigeo Anzai), it was hard to read the exhibition without preconceptions. In Anzai's shot of *Law of Multitude* (1975) in its original installation at Tokyo's Maki Gallery, the camera hovers over a sheet of transparent vinyl stretched across the room at waist height and pinched between irregular columns of concrete (below) and large stones (above). The sheet appears glassy in places and warped in others, both obscuring and



4
Kishio Suga
Chi'iron (Theory for
Creating Sites), 1977

5
Kishio Suga
Kairitsu (Space-Order),
1974/2006

accentuating the tile floor below; the textured grain of the black and white print amplifies contrasts between transparency and opacity, weightlessness and density, conveying the different forces that collide and repel in Suga's work. Seeing the installation in real life and colour at MOT, these photographic effects were diluted by peripheral visual information: visitors coming and going, the hovering invigilators and, most disappointingly, the small barrier warning viewers not to get too close.

The camera was a vital element in Suga's early practice: he used it to record the temporary sculptural situations he created – with great sensitivity and humour – in parks, gardens and other public places. The print *Inactive Environment* (1970) pictures a brick balanced on a bush; *Belt of Dependency* (1974) portrays a series of pebbles jammed into roadside grating; and *Elements in Space* (1973) shows water arcing from an upturned spigot to splash a stack of rocks. These and other photographs were mainly crammed into a single small room in the exhibition yet each is big enough, in terms of its resonance, to hold its own wall.

In the same room, monitors showed video documentation of Suga's 'Activation' performances from the years 1974 to 1981. In these fascinating studies, Suga performs sequences of actions with simple tools on found objects: gathering, stacking, folding, hammering, tossing; pebbles, string, grass,

paper, rubble. Investigating the world as a kind of sandbox of meaning that coheres one moment and disintegrates the next, the 'Activations' demonstrate how our bodies both contingently structure and are structured by the environment – a key aspect of Suga's thinking. While it was good to see these works, it was hard not to wonder what new insights might have been possible had the curators given themselves more room to play with.

The same could be said for the exhibition in general, which felt like a missed opportunity. At their best, Suga's works are startling revelations of how the tiniest atom is as significant as the entire cosmos. Perhaps the details that seemed to keep interfering at MOT are part of the expanded field of the work. But Suga also places great importance on how relationships between things are framed, and the most important frame here, that of the institution, hardly seemed accounted for. The result was an exhibition that was in time, but out of place.

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