

Introduction

The Japanese Pavilion at the 44th Venice Biennale presents the works by two Japanese sculptors. One of the artists, ENDO Toshikatsu, has been constantly using wood throughout his career, and the other, MURAOKA Saburo, mainly uses iron for his works. Endo's works have a strong hidden leaning toward allegory, while Muraoka's works contain almost cruel directness, which is naturally deeply related to their selection of materials. It is not simply a question of selection of materials, but a question of radical imagination regarding *matière*. The dialectic of their thoughts does not merely incorporate *matière*; on the contrary, their developments owe to the "dream of *matière*," much as Gaston Bachelard tried to see "direct image of *matière*" in the quintessence of poesy.

However, sculpture is not a self-realization of material. What we have to avoid when we discuss materials is to carelessly personify it. In such a case, sculpture is reduced to tactility, or buried into the history of technique or resigned to being just a literal presentation of an object; thus, sculpture is turned into flaccid space lacking criticism. The works of these two artists, however, are not such works. They evoke the opaque surface of sculpture "in our age" as objects infused with a charged atmosphere.

They arouse the time peculiar to *matière*: Endo, by using fire, and Muraoka, by heat. For us it is the time lost beforehand, the time in which we cannot coexist. Fire is extinguished and heat is gone, and only silent time is left before us. But the dark emotions brought by its "absence" secretly tell us of the presence of our primordial memory. They control our body as the inner other, and by giving a shape to this inner being, the "dream of *matière*" threatens history or any body structuralized by history.

To the so-called Simulationists who self-consume the externalized structure of subject, that is, to the Neo-Modernists, history is constantly fragmented and juxtaposed as the object of manipulation, and it is in a sense a parody of self-criticism that is the quintessence of Modernist art and that can be considered as paradoxically being buried into history. At such times, it must be noted that these two artists share a critical consciousness to history in that they seal the meaning inherent in a sculpture within the work itself and try to leave only the surface of that meaning as an absolute extraneous substance is exceptional.

However, I think I have tried too hard to categorize these two artists into the same viewpoint. Although they both have a certain ideological leaning, they do not belong to the same school. Also, there is no strategic intention in the combination of these two artists. I only feel proud to having the chance to present together the works of these two sculptors whom I have long admired. I would like to follow their thought with their works.

TATEHATA Akira

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The fire burns, today, in another name. André du Bouchet

Allegory about allegory. The paralogism itself of the thought to live “the lost allegory” is already an allegory. If not, to ENDO Toshikatsu, a fantasy of recurrence to the primordality must have ended up in being the mere reflection of a defeatist and heroic sentiment. We must not forget that the poetic truth has always appeared as the revolving symbols. “The true existence is in another place” and a search for this “other place,” as Octavio Paz commented, is not to escape to a heroic life, but to evoke the other here and now. Or as Pierre Gascar said in seeing “Cave D” in eastern France: “The reason that we are attracted to the underground world is not because we like ominous things or are fascinated by nihilism (defeatism!), rather, it is due to the instinct to return to the source, to draw new energy, and get new perspective for better life.”

It is such allegorical paralogism that saves us from being buried into history, and awakens our inner other. Indeed Endo’s “dream of *matière*” is heavy. Because the whole weight of existence, which is here and now, despite its having a primordial body, is unmistakably weighed upon by its fictitious chaos. He has written on the paralogism of dreaming as follows:

“Even if we realize that modern wisdom cannot embrace the entirety of our ‘existence,’ we are unable to retreat to a mythical and harmonious world view as before. Though we still carry the trauma of modernity in our body, we are left to dream of ‘the lost age’ as another form of wisdom as well.”

Therefore, it must be said that his act of burning his works also contains a double-meaning. In many cases, he carbonizes wooden surfaces, then tars them to complete his works. Whether it is opened to the public or not, his ritual by fire is not merely to gain an effect of texture. It is an ignited concept as well as an experience of purely material ecstasy. His is an Apocalyptic world of burial as well as generation: something which wants to be eternal in each moment, which brightens the primordial night, the shining darkness, and, above all, the cremation of modernity.

Du Bouchet says: “Out of us there is not a fire,” and he continues, “if you support yourself, then you self-ignite.” If it is a dream, then it is a dream that ignited itself because it could not bear its own weight.

The cremated modernity—its dream is not to heal our trauma. The modernity never ends in ashes, but smolders in ember in deep black and exposes its form as an anxious, extraneous substance. Or is the artist trying to deepen the paralogism of dream with his sculptures containing fundamental ambiguity, this extraneous substance? If so, then we must question what is burned and what is left behind.

Let us return to the form of his works; pail, coffin, raft,

boat, canal, colonnade, circle, cylinder . . . In a way, they seem to be the excavated antiquities or ritual articles of “the lost age.” Their images make us feel a strong sense of symbolism. But as often pointed out, if we look only at the forms, they are simple and basic forms without any trace of emotion. (They can be even called geometric.) The most banal conclusion that can be derived from them is that his works are a jumble of Japanese sentiments and Minimalist concepts. But even if Minimalist concept had given him some influence during his early years, jumping to such a conclusion is too hasty. We must not be fooled by a frivolous adaptation (local version) of Minimal Baroque.

The truth is to the contrary. Directly opposed to Minimalism, the extreme execution of Formalism, the unreduceability of form itself of sculpture is pursued. By burning the literal surface of the object and intensifying the multiplicity (ambiguity) of its texture, the flame of allegory allows the recurrence of the symbol. Its *matière* should not be admired as a form, nor considered as manipulation of tautological concepts, but it should live as a symbol. But “the age” is lost beforehand. The base that guarantees the centripetalism of image—that dream community, is no longer in existence. We are unable to decipher it in the same direction. Its self-contradiction places the viewer in a state of certain double-bind. Though it fascinates us with the “power of meaning,” it threatens us with the absence of content when we come close. The work binds us, as an absolute extraneous substance that will not be deciphered nor let us be indifferent.

Fire is the symbol of the loss of symbol: it blazes in the cremation of modernity, an event that is also supported by Endo’s “vertical” imagination, which relies on his own body and action. That is why the ominous ambiguity of the surface of the remains retains the sharp tension of a strong image penetrating both the individual and society.

In contrast, it is water that should be regarded as the metaphor of “horizontal.” According to Bachelard, “it brings about a quiet movement of image, raising the anchor of dream attached to object.” It is a substance closer to death, and more stoic. In his early career, Endo had been fascinated with water as “the most reserved and neutral material,” and “a substance speaking with as few words as possible.” But later, he found out that water was a metaphor of effusive memory, that is, a fountain, as well as horizontality:

“Water soon began speaking with many words, sending out mysterious signals from behind its transparent appearance. Water was the entire body of language given meaning in the long history of the human race. Water is not a liquid in a vessel, but a mass of words constantly springing up from the depth of the earth.”

Therefore, water has a double-role. One is as the invisible water, that primordial memory quietly filling the depth

of the flaming fire in his *Coffin of Seele* (1985). There, flame blazes as a requiem to the water. But the dialectic of fire and water induces an encounter with another image, that of "flame of water." And this is the fundamental metaphor of a fountain as "not a liquid in a vessel, but a mass of words constantly springing up from the depth of the earth."

"At this time, I was thinking of returning water to the earth. I dug a hole in the earth with a shovel and filled it with water. And at the same time, I also understood that this was an excavation of water from the earth... Water passes through me and around me, then it makes a connection at a certain level. Then the water returns to the earth, or the excavated water instantaneously changes to flame and begins to burn. This series of acts has an origin somewhere in our bodies and seems to be arranged in a beautiful memory accompanied by madness, a memory of destruction, burial and prayer."

"Fountain" is also the title of his work exhibited here, which is deeply related to the meaning of a circle and its extension, a cylinder; that is, the allegory that would be brought about by the hollow space.

His works have always contained hollowness; not only a circle but a coffin, a canal, or a hole dug up in the earth. Naturally, it had quite a different nature from the space of void that modern art has questioned. It is not hollowness in contrast to reality, nor negative space that brings about the dynamism of massive form. It actualizes the lack of something which ought to be there. Paradoxically speaking, it is the realization of absence. The suction of hollow space may stimulate the imagination of the viewer, but as the lack is essential, the result is always futile.

Or it may be said, in the style of M. Blanchot, that we are endlessly forced to continue in centripetal movement because of the absence of meaning at the center. What is an issue here is not the impossibility of attaining the ultimate interpretation, but the inevitability of the movement toward interpretation. It is like filling in a bottomless hole. As it is a hole, it must be filled, because a hole exists only to be filled.

Endo's cylindrical *FOUNTAIN* is actually brought about by "removing the bottom of a pail." However, he is not a Kafka of today, just playing with the allegory of absurdity. In a recent interview, he tells of his dream of *matière*: "When the bottom is removed and emptiness is achieved, an infinite effusion, the infinity of a fountain is obtained." The allegory of absence is immediately transformed into a vertical image blowing up through its emptiness, and, as another allegory, saves the world from the retreat to nihilism.

Here is a drawing. A circle viewed from above is drawn and an innumerable number of streams converge within like lines of magnetic force, then diffuse to the opposite directions. Standing in front of his sculptures, we wonder

whether our power of imagination is controlled by such an allegorical magnetic field. "A circle is charged with a vertical force": it is a movement that contends with the absence, a dream that a circle dreams.

However, perhaps we must talk about the very profound sense of existence found in his works. Secret rituals by fire and water are but events staging the eternal time of his works, and at the gallery, we are only left to feel the silent and overpowering presence of massive black blocks arrogantly left on the earth. Some may have the opinion that they are too heavy to be considered as high art. But this unreasonable heaviness is by itself a criticism. It is confronting power of the times; not satisfied with daily routine, it accuses the trap of frivolous returning to the Japanese tradition, it doubts internationality, and always evokes the inner other, that which rightly tries to be contemporaneous.

Probably his largest work of over three meters high, *EPITAPH*, is in the making. This huge cylindrical piece of stacked wooden blocks whose surfaces are burned black seems to be unknown ruins, or a pillbox without gunports, a fortress, or an imprisoning tower. An epitaph without an inscription; is it the memory of the lost age, or the seal of modernity? Either way, a black cylinder that would be standing in the gallery, secretly hiding the unfathomable darkness of otherness, must be the most honest monument of our day with the very heaviness of its silence.

Starting with a Missing Aspect

ENDO Toshikatsu

I have never thought about matters directly related to form, such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and dance, to which the word “art” primarily refers. Occasional discussions in educational settings or in the process of producing art works invariably considered existing form to be an obvious premise. To a greater or lesser extent, the resulting artistic outlines simply suggested a cultural sort of self-sufficiency, without providing an answer to the fundamental question of expression, namely, the genesis of art, which I, half consciously, sought. What was always important to me was something amorphous that existed prior to the creation of form; moreover, it was something in a completely unknown place that provided the right energy.

At a certain stage, I began to think that I, as an individual, began with a missing aspect, or defect. From my perspective now, I see this imperfection as the flawed structure that mankind has been fated to bear since humans first attained a linguistic existence. I was constantly prodded by this missing aspect, and felt that I had to resolve the problem somehow. In other words, imperfection was the original sin that devoured the fruit of knowledge, namely language, at the same time that it was the initial force generating compensatory action. The meaning of this missing aspect was manifested in various forms: sometimes as a mysterious story appearing in a dream, sometimes as a destructive impulse inexplicably welling up backwards in the body, sometimes as a darkness beyond description that suddenly yawned. Powerful emotional experiences of this sort flung out unformed words generated by this imperfection, which we should have heeded. Long ago, before I knew about painting, sculpture, or poetry, what I sensed in the word “art” was that it contained a hidden power to solve this defect. As I suggested before, as far as I was concerned, questions of form did not matter as long as light was shed on this problem.

A solution to the missing aspect appeared and disappeared through sudden fissures in the flow of ordinary time. For instance, when, as a child in the hills, fields, and along the riverbank, I placed stones in a row, played with dirt, erected branches of trees, or set fire to dead leaves . . . In a different sense, at times such motions seemed momentarily linked to a secret action. A slight change in the angle of a gesture seemed to easily open a door, enabling me to enter the world that was faintly visible beyond it. Although that sort of impression invariably vanished in an instant, a vertical feeling resembling a prayer always remained afterwards.

Another fissure appeared in places where everyday space was catabolized. Ordinarily, all adults seemed to repress a sort of frenzy. But when the ordinary surface disappeared and light was cast upon the innate form of life hidden underneath, the repressed aspect suddenly began to sparkle, imbued with vitality. The roots of that vitality are linked to desire that simultaneously seems to sever the self and others with a sword. What, for instance, is the meaning of the light that inexplicably arises out of the deep sorrow caused by sadness and loss at a funeral procession?

Whenever I saw a funeral, I wondered about the glow that pervaded the setting. But there must have been a fundamental reason for it that transcended being rejected as something inexplicable . . .

I remember being given an assignment to make a model of a human figure when I was a student. By that point, I could no longer find artistic significance in lifelike figures, which I repeatedly had to make. More than that, however, I always had greater interest in the existence of real human figures than in sculpted forms. So I tried to get by using a more direct method than molding a clay figure: I made a model of a nude woman through the direct application of plaster. This necessitated removing the paper which I had used as the core while applying the plaster. I broke the completed statue in half and set the paper on fire.

The statue I had created burned before my very eyes. The lifelike human figure created out of inorganic material was transformed in my head into the figure of a real human that was being immolated. It was, unquestionably, a real body. When I split the figure in half and set it on fire, deep inside I felt a certain nostalgia begin to stir in the recesses where lost memories lurked. A hot substance, dully gleaming like melted steel, seemed to pass through the core of my body and radiate from the top of my head in the direction of heaven.

Simultaneously, a welter of strong emotions buried in my head scattered various words as they vanished in the darkness. It was the salvation I had sought. I realized that my act of lighting a fire marked a requiem for the part of my being that had been lost as a result of that initial, missing aspect mentioned above. That, I think, was the starting point for my work.

TATEHATA Akira

That day a horse/ Is finished with horseshoes—/ Or maybe vice versa—
Ishihara Yoshiro

If you close your eyes and stick out your tongue, searing heat is wrenched from the tip of your tongue.

The feeling intensifying over time (try it, and see), he unexpectedly says, is a measurement of the universe. The universe touching the tip of your tongue is a shocking reality—frigid air emanating from the universe inhabited by enormous stars. And then when you open your eyes, it seems very humorous . . .

In this small yet sublime “experiment,” one can glimpse the figure of a lonely sculptor trying to grasp concepts wholly as a material experience. If the tongue is a metaphor for language, then this gesture represents the abandonment of language. Inasmuch as this same gesture offers a palpable sense of the coldness of the universe, one could also say that MURAOKA Saburo has abandoned a cultural basis, a common history, or, in other words, an inward sense of community, trying to become a thinker (the hot tongue) in a secret room. It is a heretical political stance: he is trying to become the absolute other confronting the age.

Sticking out one’s tongue denotes derision. Muraoka made a plaster image of a tongue and enclosed it in an iron book to form a weird monument. The title of the strange object hidden by lead is *The Tip of Heat*.

In the ordinary sense of the word, Muraoka Saburo could be said an artist of “objects.” During the first part of the 1980s especially, when, ironically, a great deal of fuss was made about the revival of historicism, he devoted himself in a secret room to the creation of objects resembling scientific experiments.

In mid-1980s, he made three objects that I take the liberty of calling a trilogy. One, *The Tip of Salt*, made in 1985, consists simply of a thick iron pole resting vertically against a wall. White grains of salt blow on the sharply pointed tip. The work depicts the aftereffect of salt water evaporating instantly when it hits red-hot iron. The work in front of us presents a completely emotionless scene, a simple fact. But consider the following, for example. A substance designated by the chemical symbol NaCl has a tip (something perfectly plausible), which is manifested here. The sharp iron point, which physiologically causes the sense of touch to become tense, perhaps is perceived by Muraoka as a thrilling place where concept and substance meet by chance. The directness of something perceived as the basis of an aspect completely different from literal reduction makes us uneasy, instead, about the surface, which is not a private possession. The puzzle can only be solved through a pseudoscientific method that combines, by sheer force, an idea and its manifestation. Not even knowing how to tell whether it is false or not, all we can do is accept the impenetrable intellectual circuits in this secret room.

The other two works are *Right-Angle Water* (1983) and *Bent oxygen* (1985). The former consists of a lead bag bent at a right angle resting on an iron stand. The latter is a large lead bag hanging from a metal fitting on a wall. The bottom part of that bag too is bent. In the midst of the lead-covered darkness, quietly and unmistakably the water forms a right angle, and the oxygen is bent. This is indicated simply by vivid specificity; there are no imagistic flights, no semantic contradictions. But when we try to see beyond the detail, we are confronted with a strange obtuseness, or perhaps a blank. The objects are simply bent, and there is no way to see beyond that.

Giving water an angle, an attribute of solids, might perhaps be called a metaphorical violation of a categorical order. Moreover, the honor of being the first man to discover a way to bend gas may go to Muraoka. “The phenomenon of humor, which lies on an elevated plane, only appears as a result of what is deadly serious,” he solemnly declares. Likewise, one aspect of his science verges on the ridiculous.

But that does not soften the emotionless scene formed by the objects or lessen their complete obtuseness. The absurdity of being engrossed in representing concepts materially is a subject that at times merely invites laughter from the viewer. The objects are not like ready-made objects. Nor do they rely on the power of metamorphosis like surrealist works, or represent “dead metaphors” like Pop Art. In other words, Muraoka’s works are intrinsically unrelated to metaphor; they have no connection with metaphorical differentiation or resolution.

Since meaning has been relinquished beforehand, there are no flights of fancy or contradictions; everything displays a fearsome directness. Marcel Duchamp said: “There are no answers, because there are no questions.” In a sense, each of Muraoka’s works is an answer without a question. Depriving salt, water, and oxygen of their historical overtones and always treating them simply as substances with chemical symbols tells us the depth of Muraoka’s resignation. One could venture to say that, as substances left on earth after all meaning has withdrawn from the world, they are the antithesis of a fetish.

There are still more iron objects. An artist with a partiality above all for iron, Muraoka fascinates us by means of the unexpected rhetorical pleasure elicited from this metal, a familiar part of daily life. Take, for instance, *A Torch Cutting*, a subject that Muraoka dealt with repeatedly in the latter half of the 1980s. The work consists of an iron pole, about 6 cm in diameter and 10 m long that has been split from end to end with an acetylene torch. The pole is bow-shaped from the heat, and iron filings and soot from the torch cling to the scorched floor around it, leaving clear traces of a cruel, violent act.

Moreover, the pitiful figure of the violently severed sec-

tion is exposed to view, with streaks from the torch on its half-melted surface. If Muraoka's objects are pure substances forged out of abandonment of the world, *A Torch Cutting* represents an excess of physical intervention that exposes the void in nonhistoric material; it is the bold act of a paradoxical *tabula rasa*.

But we must recognize another private intention in the work. Through action, through gratuitous violence, Muraoka tries to distort, to bend, concepts, just as, when iron bends, the concept (of iron) bends along with the shape. It is nothing but a vain, rhetorical wish. But rhetoric is power. The power to trigger a materialistic imagination, the unmistakable power to bend concepts right in front of our eyes.

What draws the special rhetorical pleasure out of iron is heat or, more correctly, the memory of lost heat.

Muraoka has seven *Iron Books* on display at the Venice Biennale. Most are, so to speak, accounts dealing with heat, iron pages containing the memory of heat. The books on a bookrest are made of two thick iron sheets attached with hinges. A handle has been welded to the cover. When we open the covers of one titled *Turning Heat — right hand*, symmetrical yellow arcs appear on both sides of the page. An arc was etched on the lefthand page with sulfur water using the thumb and forefinger as a compass, and the hot right-hand page was closed over it. The sulfur water was instantly vaporized, and the heat crystallized in yellow on the right-hand page as a memory of the arc. When the heavy page is opened once more with the handle, the memory can be turned using the hinges as an axis.

In *The Hole of Heat*, almost the entire surface is covered with sulfur, except for the center of the page, which is left black. A small dead scarab beetle, which Muraoka found during a trip to Central Asia, has been inserted in a small hole gouged in the middle. The intersecting lines beside it indicate the latitude and longitude of Khotan, where he found the scarab. His comment, "This was taken out of the 'hole of heat,'" is devoid of feeling. There is only an iron page containing a desert and a dead scarab. The heat recalled there simply conveys a feeling of extreme dryness and the cessation of time, namely, death.

Three π -cm Nails consists of $\pi=3.14$ cm nails driven into a red-hot iron sheet. It represents the nonsensical activity of pounding the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter, or *pi*, into the iron rather than calculating it (the very image of the intent artist inspires laughter). But the resistance felt by the hammer-wielding hand must have elicited from the iron a sort of rhetorical pleasure in the act of driving abstract numbers into the heat of a substance. The three nail heads placed in a row now stand coldly and futilely on the page.

One other work by Muraoka in the exhibition, *Oxygen—Venice*, must be mentioned here. This new sculpture is a

large one consisting of a thick, 6-meter long sheet of iron, placed vertically, and six oxygen cylinders. One cylinder is welded to the end of the iron sheet; the others are placed equidistantly in a row between the end of it and the wall. All of the cylinders except the one nearest the wall are wrapped like mummies in canvas coated with white plaster. Part of the iron sheet is also covered with canvas. A drawing (really nothing more than carbon powder spread vigorously sideways with the palm of a hand) has been made at about eye level on the wall facing the last cylinder. In one place, the iron sheet, including the canvas, has been cut at an angle with a torch, and a loudspeaker has been attached, facing inward, to the edge. The sound of the sea which is being brought into the room from the underwater microphone placed in the Lagoon of Venice, should be audible.

If the squat shape of the cylinders vaguely suggests human figures, the canvas wrapped around them seeks to block the metaphor. In fact, the unwrapped cylinder breathes violently against the wall, and the oxygen that spews out scatters the carbon powder on the drawing. Meanwhile, the loudspeaker lying face down tries hard to transmit the sound of the lagoon to the iron sheet. The installation is inherently an impossible dream that merely exposes the emptiness of meaning. It is not helped by the artist's daunting statement: "a phenomenon on an elevated plane called humor."

The sight of substances left in front of us, with the ruminative circuits in a secret room blocked, seems all too empty if the question "Why?" is posed. Muraoka Saburo has solemnly inserted time and distance that cannot be consumed, in a society where sensory circulation and exchange are affirmed simply as being sensory. It represents the void in an age engendered by politics.

With the humorous spirit of someone who is intrinsically different, Muraoka will probably continue to offer us his favorite metal, one-sidedly, as an answer without a question.

MURAOKA Saburo

I have been bringing into my works such non-visual, fluid, and uncertain substances or their phenomena as, ecosystems, liquid (water), gas (oxygen), sound (vibration), and heat, etc. It is my method of approach to the structuralization of thought, that is, the re-visualization of space, and the existence of concept. And because I gravely doubt the historical evaluation of our culture, it has to be hastened.