

AGAINST THE AS-IT-IS: AN INQUIRY INTO SCULPTURAL BODIES IN RECENT JAPAN

RYO KATSUMATA

Art critic based in Tokyo

Abstract

This article aims to propose the way of an interpretation on recent sculptural works in Japan, especially ones with bodily figuration. Although they would share some features with artistic production outside the country and the proposed approach is not comprehensive considering variegated contemporary sculptural practices, it is suggestive that there was a historical situation where artists criticized the human-based representation of the world and turn to a kind of naturalism, as led by Mono-ha in the context of postwar Japan. Some succeeding sculptors have struggled against the naturalism that demands to leave things as it is. They have explored to develop their sculptural bodies without simply returning to the humanistic notion of them.

KEY WORDS: Sculpture, Body, Surface, Cyborg, Character

Resumen

Resumen

Este artículo busca proponer una interpretación sobre las obras escultóricas recientes en Japón, especialmente aquellas con figuración corporal. Aunque comparten algunas características con la producción artística fuera del país y el enfoque propuesto no es exhaustivo, dado lo variado de las prácticas escultóricas contemporáneas, resulta sugerente considerar una situación histórica en la que los artistas criticaron la representación del mundo centrada en lo humano y se inclinaron hacia una especie de naturalismo, como lo promovió el movimiento Mono-ha en el contexto del Japón de posguerra. Algunos escultores posteriores han luchado contra el naturalismo que demanda dejar las cosas tal como son. Han explorado el desarrollo de sus cuerpos escultóricos sin regresar simplemente a una noción humanista de ellos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Escultura, Cuerpo, Superficie, Cyborg, Personaje

ARTÍCULOS

AGAINST THE
AS-IT-IS:
AN INQUIRY
INTO
SCULPTURAL
BODIES IN
RECENT JAPAN

1. From As-It-Is Condition to Emergent Surfaces

Today, it is likely to be considered that Mono-ha (school of things) is the representative avant-garde art movement in the late 1960s to early 1970s Japan. Lee Ufan (born 1936), the leading figure in both the making and discursive aspect of Mono-ha, criticized the human-based perspective to the world and explored to break through into the outside of the artificially constructed representation. This attitude aimed at a kind of an open world, that is, the world directly encountered in the state of “as-it-is,” the vividness of which cannot be experienced in the reified reality of the modern world (Lee, 1970).

However, this concept of the world “as-it-is” does not suggest that we should recognize something literally defined. Rather, Lee struggled to go beyond the generalized appearance of things. His critical discourse explores to strip things of their superficial look and open a lived relationship. It is considered this relationship that the modern, industrialized world has lost. In the standardized perspective, things would illusorily be abstracted into reified images. According to Lee, in the far past, humans, with existences like trees, birds and stones, acted as the behavior of the natural world as-it-is (Lee, 1970). He explains the lived encounter with other existence by referring to Zhuangzi.

Zhuangzi suggestively commented that seeing a tree or a stone is scarcely accomplished if we see them just as “tree” or “stone” in such a fixed view. A tree and a stone are a tree and a stone, but at the same time, they are not a tree and a stone. That is, while they are a tree and a stone, they are an immeasurable universe beyond definition, which can be compared with the sky. ... In the first place, in the natural world, have there ever been any existences corresponding to the name such as “tree” or “stone”? It would be only in the case where the viewer is an artistic “human being” who exerts the representative operation that a tree or a stone appears to be a defined object. (Lee, 1970, p. 16)

This denial of limiting things into nominal definition is one of the most prominent slogans of Mono-ha. Another representative artist of the school Sekine Nobuo (1942–2019) described that the condition of bringing a thing, for example, a glass, into liberation is to strip

it of a general status. In his explanation, we should wipe “the dust of conceptuality and nominality” off a thing, and this approach would enable us to see what otherwise could not have been seen (Koshimizu et al., 1970, p. 40)¹.

This severance of nominal definition of things is not addressed to isolate a thing from humans. Rather, as mentioned above, it is implemented to recover the unique and lived relationship with things where any concept or purpose does not intervene. Minemura Toshiaki proposed a notion “sculpturoid (rui chōkoku),” which means “something resembling sculpture,” to describe a kind of sculptural works that he thought deviate from conventional sculpture even though they shared the character of “the real things that exist in the real space” with sculpture (Minemura, 1978, p. 11). According to Minemura, Japanese “sculpturoid,” quite unlike an ontological quality of Donald Judd’s non-relational “specific objects,” has not assumed the autonomy of a thing. And he makes the point that Mono-ha activated the existential view inherent in the sensitivity of Japan or East Asia, which foregrounds the situation of a place where things reveal themselves rather than an object itself. But at the same time, the critic puts it that Mono-ha was innovative because in fact it exaggerated the self-sufficient existence of matter which had been developed by modern art (Minemura, 1979). This double aspect would, as it were, lead us to a rhetorical transposition between an ontological “a thing as-it-is” and a phenomenological “a world encountered as it is.” Despite Mono-ha’s attitude of phenomenological vision toward opening a new world, the complementary rhetoric of “as-it-is” in reality functioned as closing the door to actively “making” sculpture.

In the face of this repression, some artists sought to reinvent the notion of sculpture. One of the representative sculptors of this generation after Mono-ha is Toya Shigeo (born 1947). In struggling with the situation, he was drawn to the act of marking in space as the fundamental emergence of art making. The paradigmatic example of the act is found in the pre-historic image making in the caves such as the Lascaux and the Altamira (Toya, 1994/2014a).

It seems that this focus on what transcends history was significant for Toya in at least two points. First, it was derived from the process of tracing the root of representation before it began to be called “art”. This would be the way of restarting “making” in a different mode from that of the humanistic act which Mono-ha criticized. Second, it would keep sculpture intact from the nationality which the discourse of Mono-ha took on. He contests the tendency of exploiting the notion of “what is typically Japanese” as a cultural-political strategy since the Meiji period when American art historian and philosopher Ernest Fenollosa exerted a great influence on the formation of the national aesthetics in Japan. Toya describes this as a kind of alienation which establishes one’s value by being subject to others’ desire. He rebelled against this tendency in favor of emerging sensation without any essential basis (Toya, 2006/2014c).

In Toya’s sculptures, the dynamics of the “surface” is more important than the stable shape of a figure. Curved by a chainsaw, the surface of a wood is fractured into small parti-

1 However, it is necessary to keep in mind that the artists associated with Mono-ha were not so uniformly tied on the basis of a specific ideology, while they shared some speculation. For example, Minemura Toshiaki divides the school into three groups: (1) “Lee + Tamabi [Tama Art University] Connection,” (2) “The Geidai [Tokyo University of Art] Connection,” (3) “The Nichidai [Nihon University] Connection.” (Minemura, 1986)

cles or undulated to encroach a unified contour, which causes the effect of groping the way that complicatedly switches between inside and outside, hidden parts and revealed parts. While Baroque sculpture with complex foldings is one of the formal references of Toya's sculpture, the dynamic ambivalence between the hidden and the revealed on the surface has its basis in his thought on the ontological issue of emergence. In terms of this issue, a surface consisting the boundary between the world and a human comes to be foregrounded. For Toya, "there works both the inclination to fuse with nature and the force of getting back to the self." (Toya, 1989/2014b, pp. 166-167)

The emergent moment of human body ambiguously formed against natural background is suggested in the sculptor's representative series *Woods* from 1984. Each unit constituting the series basically has the height of 220cm, which is derived from the artist's bodily height with stretching his arms. That is, the unit with an undulated surface can be interpreted as a dual character as a tree in a woods and a human body with wrinkles. Although in Toya's *Woods*, the naturalistic motif and material (wood) is superimposed with the human body, it is not accomplished by untreated materials like in Mono-ha but sculpturally inscribed furrows on the surface. Thus there is no room for reducing them into the potentially naturalistic representation of unalienated nature as-it-is.

This attitude of questioning about a naturalistic characterization of Japanese culture can also be seen in the transnationally organized exhibition *Against Nature: Japanese Art in the Eighties* (1989-91). The exhibition aimed to focus on some aspects of contemporary Japanese art which departed from stereotypical features related to monochrome, raw material, and Zen. Instead of these naturalistic or non-subjective aspects, the curators focused on the expressions which foregrounded the profusion of colors, decoration, everyday life, figurative images, anti-naturality reflecting urban culture, and information society (Kohmoto & Nanjo, 1989).

2. Monstrous Figures to Resist an Assigned Character

The emergent surface would also collide with a norm of the bodily figure of sculpture that grew out of Western aesthetics. In *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream* (1778), Johann Gottfried Herder examines the relationship between body and clothing in sculpture. In favor of Greek sculpture, he considers that the form of a body is prior to clothing that covers it. This criterion is based on the notion of ideal figure, which is assumed to autonomously form its body by an inner force. Thus, as regards sculpture, the clothing which covers the already established body from outside is considered to be superfluous.

In Herder's discussion, clothing is likened to "a shadow, a veil" which has affinity with "sight" as a painterly sense, which tends to destroy "the beautiful fullness, depth, and volume of sculpture." (Herder, 1778/2002, pp. 41-47) For Herder, sculpture should be based on the sense of "touch" which enables us to grasp "beautiful form and beautiful shape," not

colors on the surface, as the essence of the genre (Herder,1778/2002, p. 40). Therefore, Herder considers that the surface of the sculptural figure should be transparent and subject to the shape of the nude body. When Greek sculptors needed to put clothing on their sculptures, they developed the expression that depicts the drapery of clothing that clings to the skin. It is called “wet drapery” through which the sense of hand “touches both clothing and the body at once.” (Herder,1778/2002, p. 50)

Toya’s “Woods,” as mentioned, has an emerging surface which is not unified into a smooth contour like what Herder found in Greek sculpture. The surface, allowing us to see it as skin, seems to be under bodily transformation between different characters such as human and plant without resting in an easy contemplation of Mono-ha.

Some sculptures of Funakoshi Katsura (1951–2024), who was one of the artists included in *Against Nature*, are telling in terms of this point, for they seem to have an ambivalent status. On the one hand, the wooden figures in clothing and with paint fit the concept of the exhibition. However, on the other hand, each of them stands with a faraway look in their eyes which are the exceptional parts made of marble, as if they are facing with in mind another dimension of the world. From the early 1990s, this aspect of trans-dimension had been realized in chimeric assemblage, in which human bodies are often fused with the images of the sky or mountains. This might remind us of the contemplative encounter with nature in Mono-ha, but Funakoshi produced the effect through anti-natural features such as curved and painted surfaces, assembled body rather than untreated materials.

Herder’s vision of the autonomy of a sculpture is, in addition to the norm in formal level mentioned above, based on the naturalistic essentialism relying on “character” of individual statues considered to be “a likeness of one of God’s beautiful creatures.” (Herder,1778/2002, p. 52) Criticizing a sculpture that “does not correspond to its *end*,” for example “an Apollo without the pride and courage of youth,” Herder idealizes a statue unified its whole body by a representative character (Herder,1778/2002, p. 78).

How far we stand behind them [the Greeks] may be judged by a later age. What is rarer in our day than for someone to grasp a man’s *character* as it is, to capture it and to develop it in a way that is faithful and complete? Instead, he must always make recourse to reason and morality, as to light and color; the figure will not stand on its own two feet and like a phantom its appearance changes from one side to another. (Herder,1778/2002, p. 81)

Calling for the inner nature each figure particularly has, Herder excludes surplus elements, as with the clothing, for the character. In this criterion, a figure should be protected from the attributes which interfere with its completeness, and group statues should be avoided. According to Herder, Laocoön group was produced through a meticulous devising that, on the one hand, sought to avoid the fusion of elements into “a monstrous body of man and serpent,” and on the other hand, Laocoön and his children needed to be “unified by the struggle against their opponent.” (Herder,1778/2002, p. 61) Here, the serpent does not fully fuse with Laocoön’s body but is just gripped by Laocoön’s hands remaining free and unifies figures as their common enemy. This means for wholeness, which is perceived by kinaesthetic sense of touch, would be different from that of painterly composition. As Alex

Potts puts it, Herder considers that “with seeing, things exist simultaneously, ‘side by side’ (*nebeneinander*), with touch they exist ‘within one another’ (*ineinander*).” (Potts, 2000, p. 29) Individual figures should be separated from each other and at the same time unified as a group through the directly lived process of touch defined as “inner *sympathy*,” which, as it were, immediately mediates a viewer with a statue (Herder, 1778/2002, p. 78).

Herder’s notion of sculptural body is led by a kind of Christian humanism where a sculptor is ideally considered to make a statue as a presence imbued with a character as God created Man from clay and infused it with soul. Let’s get back to the discussion on Funakoshi’s sculpture. Some Funakoshi’s figures have androgynous and therianthrope bodies which culminated in the *Sphinx* series from the mid-2000s. Because of their postures standing straight and exposing their genitalia with contemplative gazes looking faraway, they take on the appearance of divinity reminiscent of “Hermaphroditos *anasyromenos*,” a type of androgynous sculpture with apotropaic value derived from ancient Greece (Ajootian, 1997).

The androgyny, however, had already appeared in earlier figures, the upper half of the body of which have swollen breasts, and the whole shape of it resembles phallus as Funakoshi acknowledged (Funakoshi, 2015). It might remind us of Constantin Brancusi’s *Torso of a Young Man*, which looks like either a phallic monument or a body without external organs that indicates a particular sex. The divinity of the androgynous bodies of *Sphinx* suggests a complete existence which transcends our mortality or mundane status, though they are formed basically in the articulation of human body unlike Brancusi’s non-human bodies such as abstract “bird” which, as David Getsy points out, most successfully achieved to transcend binary gender assignment (Getsy, 2015).

While *Sphinx* registers the self-sufficient divinity, it is built through the assemblage of different parts each of which has its own materiality such as camphor wood, miscellaneous tree, marble, leather and steel. This inorganic or discontinuous synthesis of bodily parts is probably derived from the series’ mythical motif, sphinx. The chimeric combination of this body might deviate from the norm of the unity of character proposed by Herder, who excoriated “a monstrous body of man and serpent.” No matter how Funakoshi’s sculptures are resonant with Mono-ha’s vision of nature in which the encountering and the encountered fuse into one form, or with Herder’s vision of a united whole of a divine or heroic character, they to some extent deviate from some entity completed “as-it-is.” Rather, as we saw in “Sphinx,” they opened an unnatural reconstruction of bodies by introducing artificially processed skins and discontinuously combined parts.

3. From the Myth of Origin to Permeable Boundaries

It might be productive to depict this sort of body with partial status as a “cyborg,” as well as the monstrous characters such as chimera or sphinx. Suggestively, the cover illustration of Donna Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), *Cyborg* by Lynn Randolph, is depicted as an assemblage of a sphinx and a woman engaging in infor-

mation processing. As Haraway puts it in “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in terms of “cyborg feminism,” any “natural matrix of unity” is no longer wanted (Haraway, 1985/1991, p. 157).

While referring to the situation where “in the ‘Western’ sense, the end of man is at stake,” Haraway proposed the term “informatics of domination” to describe a world system developed in the late 20th century (Haraway, 1985/1991, p. 160). This recent system mediated by new technologies in fields such as communication science and biology is related to new forms of control and resistance, on which cyborg tries to reconstruct the boundaries encountered in daily experience. It is telling that Haraway introduces the model of “networking” as the mode of “both a feminist practice and a multinational corporate strategy,” which suggests “the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and in the body politic.” (Haraway, 1985/1991, p. 170)

It is necessary to note that, in the genealogy of sculptural bodies, there are precedential practices where the cyborg imagery is referred to, such as the works of South Korean artist Lee Bul (born 1964). For the discussion in the present essay, the most suggestive point in Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” is that the life of the cyborg does not presuppose any unified whole as an origin.

The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense — a ‘final’ irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic *telos* of the ‘West’s’ escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space. An origin story in the ‘Western’, humanist sense depends on the myth of original unity, fullness, bliss and terror, represented by the phallic mother from whom all humans must separate, the task of individual development and of history, the twin potent myths inscribed most powerfully for us in psychoanalysis and Marxism. (Haraway, 1985/1991, pp. 150-151)

The definite dichotomy of unity and separation would generate the narratives of utopic emancipation from mundane relations, which aim at undifferentiated symbiosis or unalienated freedom and equilibrium. The cyborg imagery seems no longer to rely on this kind of utopia often expressed by the image of “innocent nature” which entails the gendered notion of motherhood, or by the image of what is autonomously free-floating above this mother earth. In the approaches around sculpture, these images are sometimes carried by the undifferentiated amorphousness of raw materials as matrices for shapes, or sometimes pursued by an autonomous form. In these cases, a sculpture tends to assume the definite origin or end of its formation. However, unlike the sculptural body infused with a soul by a superior creator which was presupposed in Herder’s discussion, “the cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust.” (Haraway, 1985/1991, p. 151)

In the context of sculpture in the second half of 20th century Japan, the mythic image of the figure created from mud was adopted by Kurokawa Hirotake (born 1952), but in an

inflected way due to the historical condition after Mono-ha. Alongside Toya, Kurokawa struggled to develop the updated way of “making” rather than just following Mono-ha’s norm of not-making or not-structuring. As his resolution, Kurokawa started to make bronze sculptures which have two-sided textures, including the *Golem* series inspired by Adam made of the mass of earth, which is mentioned in Genesis. On the one side, a part called “nude,” bronze is left in black and rough, the state of being poured in a mold. On the other side, called “tongue,” the surface of the bronze figure is ground, that is, carved to get lustrous (Yamaura, 2003). Here, we can see the formation of the emergent surface of the human body alongside Toya’s practice of inscription onto the wood’s “skin.”

However, as recognizable in the dichotomy of “nude” and “tongue,” which appears to correspond to that of nature and culture or body and soul, there remains a room for an innocent matrix of “origin” of a bodily figure. In Kurokawa’s *Golem*, it is carried by the materiality of bronze left intact as a metaphor of divine creation and primordial earth preceded to and protected against artificial-artistic operations. As long as this prior base to “carving” is presupposed as a metaphorical factor, the potential of the active surfaces would not sufficiently be opened. Judith Butler examines the notion of innocent base like “blank page” prior to inscription that is implicitly conserved in structuralist discourses. In keeping with Butler’s discussion, it would be required to recognize the bodies that structure their figures through the polyphonic dynamics without any exceptional foundation secured from juridical or discursive operations.

The culturally constructed body would be the result of a diffuse and active structuring of the social field with no magical or ontological origins, structuralist distinctions, or fictions of bodies, subversive or otherwise, ontologically intact before the law. (Butler, 1989, p. 607)

As a constructive or plastic procedure, sculptural approaches around bodies would no longer need such a metaphor of ontological space of origin. The sculptures by Aoki Noe (born 1958), which were exhibited alongside Kurokawa’s works in the recent collection exhibition at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, seem to be suggestive in this regard². In *Moya 2018-I*, contiguously connected rings of steel are structured into porous surfaces undulating as if they were swaying in a breeze. Each ring would be a metaphor of a microscopic particle of mist in the air, and at the same time, with the artist’s print works, it probably corresponds to the permeability of cellular texture of body. Moreover, it is important that the steel sculpture is realized in the weightless status where the gravity due to the materiality of metal is resolved into the skinny drapery of the mist. Here, the distinction between humans and the world is getting dissolved, but in a different way from Mono-ha. The particle imagery as a transitive factor also works in the sculptural conception of Nawa Kohei (b. 1975), who conceives “the interconnectedness of cells across all species.” (Nawa, 2022, n.p.) Aoki’s misty skins, which do not insist on the autonomous unity of wholeness, foreground the potential of bodies to intersect with others both physically and imaginarily. The permeability of boundaries is, as mentioned, a feature of the cyborg depicted by Haraway.

2 The exhibition was on view from January 23rd to April 7th, 2024 at the National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

4. The Critical Intensity of Growth

One of the recent sculptural practices which take on some affinities with cyborg imagery is ceramic figures by Fujiwara Ayato (born 1975). Fujiwara's statues standing contemplatively with their eyes closed might remind us of Funakoshi's ones. Also, their bodies sometimes fuse with the bulge of a jar, suggesting an inner space although it does not appear filled but evacuated to give the figure's face a melancholically immersive look. There seems to be a room for something as an invisible factor which inhabits and animates the body. In this point, Fujiwara's statues might be connected to the genealogy of ontological criteria about sculpture.

But at the same time, some figures by Fujiwara have excessive attributes or belongings and structural dynamics that dismantle the introverted impression. From earlier works, Fujiwara appears to have explored the quality of the surface as an interface between different figures or objects to structure a chimeric complex. Making the boundary of bodies ambiguous, poured glaze mediates human's hair and clothing, another body, objects or architectural elements. For example, hair slips into clothing, or articulations of a body are overwritten by architectural joints of plates. This would amplify the allegorical exchanges of meanings on the surface of the body, which encroach the fixed identity of the figure.

Therefore, we might be able to examine Fujiwara's sculpture through an entangled interpretive framework. In the recent *Images (Statue) / Images (Pedestal) -Axis and Surroundings-* series (fig. 1), a pedestal on which a ceramic figure is placed has a disk-shaped top similar to a potter's wheel. So, in a way, the sculpture emphasizes the central axle around which the shape comes to emerge. However, at the same time, the centrifugal force of the rotation of the potter's wheel suggests the outer surface of the figure and the surroundings of it. And in the series, the imagery of a jar, which lacks the inner substance, not only causes the vacuous vibe, but also seems to have transformed the body into a monstrous structure that has externalized viscera and tracts playing on the skin like planets in the universe. Such an entangled dynamics between the centripetal direction and the centrifugal extraction is described by Mori Keisuke as "likely to be part and whole, autonomous and heteronomous." (Mori, 2024, n.p.)

The bionic rearrangement of bodies is introduced in the practices of Saeborg (born 1981), whose name clearly suggests cyborg. The artist's occasionally wearable rubber figures exaggerate their sensuous bulge of balloons. The tension on the skin as the sign of lively fullness produced by internal air pressure goes critical and paradoxically warns the end of its life, that is, the explosion of organs. Regarding his sculptural works covered with leather, Ishihara Tomoaki (born 1959) also mentioned this surface tension as a factor which defines the shape of a human body, referring to the image of explosive bodies depicted in Otomo Katsuhiko's manga *AKIRA* (1982-1990) (Ishihara, 2012). As for Saeborg, this externalization is realized in the works where female pigs are slaughtered and hung, or a part of their bodies is sliced and removed then their ribs are made to expose. Obviously, these depictions are related to the issues of feminism or animal welfare. And such features as the "exaggerated" quality of sensuousness, prosthetic structures, and radical hybridization transcend the nor-



Fig. 1: Fujiwara Ayato, *Images(Statue) / Images(Pedestal) -Axis and Surroundings-06*, 2022-23. Glazed ceramic, 190 × 55 × 57 cm. Photo by Yanagiba Masaru.

mative representations of stereotypically gendered or classified bodies. Saegorg describes the body in a latex suit as comparable with toy dolls or drag queens (Saeborg, 2017).

The paradox that an excessive extension of the body indicates both intensive vitality and the crisis for the life or the rearrangement of the form of it might also be seen in the works of Nagai Solaya (born 1991). In the *metaraction* series, a ready-made object such as

a stuffed toy is stuffed in another shape of translucent acrylic layer. For example, in *meta-raction #10* (fig. 2), a teddy bear is stuffed in a neon-colored acrylic container whose shape was cast from a raccoon dog of Shigaraki ceramics, well-known as a mascot in Japan. The original surface, that is, the bear's outer appearance, is distorted and internalized by the raccoon dog to dissolve into a hazy crust. In this incomplete amalgam, the bear's shape has become an ambivalent status between the stuffing and the stuffed or shape and matter. Here, two elements composing the sculpture are both ready-made shapes, so it is difficult

Fig. 2: Nagai Solaya, *meta-raction #10*, 2014. Teddy bear, acrylic, 148 × 80 × 70 cm. Photo by Kato Ken.



to identify any “origin” of the definitive surface as idealized in Herder’s discussion on statues. Rather, the hybrid creature, the internal space of which is partially filled, but partially vacant, appears to be oscillating between life and death. The half-corrupted bear suggests it is dying, and the half-filled raccoon dog suggests it is in the embryonic phase toward birth or, in the parasitic relationship. It seems this in-between status that makes the sculptural figure fresh. The entanglement of life and death would have some relation to the charm of the stuffed duck Nagai purchased in the university days, which the artist describes as the dead creature standing as if it is living (Nagai, 2023).

This lack of wholeness and struggle over an imagery of figure would not be grasped sufficiently if we consider it from the perspective of the fixed dichotomy of inside and outside. In Nagai’s sculpture, physically, the two elements are inside and outside, respectively. But optically, they are both presented to and superimposed in our eyes through the translucent layer. Here, the term “inside” is not necessarily put as the clearly oppositional notion against “outside.” Both play on the ambiguous, hazy surface as if they entangle to get to another form of life. This actively entangling surface weaving inside and outside would not only be differentiated from the superficial imagery that was criticized by Mono-ha as an obstacle to the lived experience of the world, but also abolish the subservient status that Herder forced onto clothing.

5. The Rearrangement of Membranes

In favor of some figures who developed their mature works in the 1980s such as Toya, Kurokawa, Tawa Keizo (born 1952), Minemura proposed the term “Katamari sculpture,” which literally means solidified sculpture, as opposed to the recent three-dimensional works that were realized through constructive procedure or spatial articulation. The critic considers that in the works of “Katamari sculpture,” the presentation of materialistic facts which our sense of touch can grasp is not their aim. Rather, the physical intensity is considered to be pursued in order to finally heighten the shock due to the facing with the incompetence of the tactile ability to grasp a metaphysical entity. According to Minemura, it is this moment that enables us to transcend mundane experience and, in the negative manner, reach “haptic sense” which he defines as “unbodily sensations in the depth of the body.” (Minemura, 1993, p.12)

Some recent practices examined in the present essay, as seen in the cyborg imagery, explore trans-humanistic bodies which does not insist on the organic whole with self-sufficiency, but in the different way from the formulation that presupposes the negative, that is, untouchable basis which transcends the sensitivity of mortal presence. Rather, some suggestive works present bodies as a node of manifold parts or planes, not as a negative medium for an unbodied end.

The node as a bodily interface in *Maihime* (fig. 3) by Yamauchi Shota (born 1992), who has educational backgrounds both of sculpture and moving image and has addressed the theme of the relationship between technology and humans, is presented as sensual rub-



Fig. 3: Yamauchi Shota,
Maihime, 2021.
Photo by Tayama Tatsuyuki.

ber skins and a silicon tube which mediate human and nonhuman. On the screen, a gorilla-like 3DCG creature with double skin, which looks like either an organic membrane or an industrial rubber suit, presents mechanical gestures. The contact of the two layers seems to make the creature vigorous, for when it strips itself of the outer layer, it rapidly becomes aged and weakened. This contrast of vitality is also seen in the performance accompanied by the work. A performer in a rubber suit is connected to the creature on the screen through a silicon tube implying an umbilical cord and they dance in sync. This connection presents the sensual relationship between humans and nonhuman actors such as animals, technological apparatus or digitally processed imagery. In addition, the creature and the performer with rubber skin have no distinct external genitalia, so this interspecific relationship does not seem to be based on the binary gender assignment.

Maihime suggests three boundary breakdowns Haraway points out in relation to the cyborg imagery: the breakdown of the boundary between human and animal, animal-human (organism) and machine, physical and non-physical (Haraway, 1985/1991). The last one, in the discourse of sculpture, might conjure up a non-solid structuring of bodies. This would lead us to another telling example: *The Distant Body* (fig. 4) by Maeda Kasumi (born 1991). In the work, the non-solid element is represented by a double-layered screen. One of the layers is a screen or wall in the actual exhibition space on which an inclusive image is pro-



Fig. 4: Maeda Kasumi,
The Distant Body, 2019.
Video, 9 min 13 sec.
Video shooting by comuramai.

jected. On the other, a fabric screen *within* the former image, Maeda's figure is projected. In the video, the body image caught up in the optical gap between the two screens conveys, as the title suggests, the farness of the body which evades from grasp.

But this non-physical body then starts to get restructured toward the assemblage with physical parts. The artist actually comes in the frame and sits behind the screen. Then incisions are made in the screen, from which four limbs protrude as superimposed on the projected image of the artist rubbing legs. In sync with this rubbing motion, actual hands attach clay on the actual legs as though they made the mold for casting. Finally, the projected body goes away, and the actual limbs are removed from the mold, leaving the hollow skin made of massive material but has lost its substance. The skin, left as the vestige of the interaction between the physical and nonphysical body, looks like a phantom as Shibukawa Maron points out (Shibukawa, 2022). The work deploys the surfaces each of which suggests the potential formation of the body and entangles each other to explore the haptical reality, though they are not mediated into an united whole. Thus a kind of unattained body image to pursue and lack to be filled might be suggested here. However, it would not be the limit

composing, as it were, the negative theology of “Katamari sculpture” but be an active process of structuring the body that feels real.

It is telling that this structuring process is based on several “surfaces,” for we might be able to see them as skins or clothing as the mutative—not subservient—extension of skin. The extensive surfaces mutated into a manifold structure is also explored by Saijo Aka-ne (born 1989), who has developed the concept called “Phantom Body.” Each of her ceramic sculptures based on the concept has a hollow structure. It reminds us of the creepy ceramic objects with bodily apertures by Yagi Kazuo (1918-79), one of the founders of the Sodeisha Group, which led the avant-garde ceramic movement in postwar Japan.

However, Saijo’s sculptures are sometimes realized in bodily scale or cast from the artist’s own body not unlike Maeda’s *The Distant Body. Orchard* has multiple orifices from which several people can blow into the inside simultaneously, reverberating manifold sounds. In such a performance, each performer’s lips contact with the orifice, which forms a continuum of a sculpture and bodies through their inner membranes. The infused breath and earth material suggests the myth of creation by God. But in *Orchard*, what is interactively organized is a chimeric complex of bodies, which appears to be converted into a series of tubular bypasses without being hidden inside any outer frame that unifies them into one, integrated whole. The porous continuum of surfaces has no clear boundary of inside and outside, as Saijo explains the influx of the breath through the inner tracts as an attempt to extend and expand visceral sensation (Saijo, 2022).

6. Physical Realities Explored Through Play

Saijo’s works would share the features with the works of some other figures discussed above in its disjunctive relationship between humans (performers) and objects, as well as in the imagery of externalized viscera. Here, bodies are not only the motif of sculpture, but also actors engaging or intersecting with objects. The behaviors of performers contacting their mouth with the orifices in *Orchard* suggest a ceramic bowl as a tool for daily meal. Such bodily engagement or expansion seems to be preceded by some figures in the 1980s or 1990s, even if their works did not foreground such excessive entanglement as the cyborg imagery. Some artists who exhibited at *Centrifugal Sculpture: An Aspect of Japanese Sculpture in the Last Decade* (1992) seem to have developed this notion of the intersection between body and thing. Ishihara was one of them, and in keeping with the expansive body image mentioned above, the adjective “centrifugal” in the title is suggestive. Speaking of some other figures, Imamura Hajime (born 1957) has subsequently yielded bodily figures to parasitic growth of fern fronds or mushrooms; Nakahara Kodai (born 1961) introduced the term “possessions” as a part of his works’ title in the 1980s, which compares the adjacency between cells composing one’s body and that between the body and personal belongings as though bringing the body’s limits into oscillation (Nakahara, 2014); Takayanagi Eri (born 1962) amplifies the interactive manners that things afford human behavior.

The exhibition also includes *Sculpture Costume (for three persons)* (1990) made in collaboration of three artists, Morimura Yasumasa (born 1951), Yamasaki Toru (born 1960), Kondo



Shigeru. This wearable device combines three persons into sculptural figures as though it simulated the statue group of caryatids. The attempt of presenting bodies as sculpture is preceded by figures like Gilbert & George, who elaborated the notion of “living sculpture.” But here, it would be productive to focus on the prosthetic device which partly replaces the former body. The works of Washimi Yusuke (born 1996) based on the composition of daily manufactured goods (fig. 5) are one of the recent sculptural practices of wearability, alongside other figures including Saeborg. In some of Washimi’s wearable sculptures, the exuberant growth of patterns is introduced through the reiterative arrangement of identical plastic parts. This structural condition seems compatible with a scalable virtual space, into which the invaded body might be transferred and in which it would be transformed. The senses of other dimensions which motivate bodily arrangement to mutate would, in the case of Washimi, be related to the interest in popular culture such as manga, anime, and live-action films or TV dramas with special effects called “tokusatsu” like *Kamen Rider (Masked Rider)* (Washimi, 2023).

The transformation parasitically developed through the relationships between bodies and fictional imagery does not necessarily alienate one’s body from a lively condition. Rather, there remains surplus parts which could not fully be effaced, not unlike the figure in insect-like mask in *Kamen Rider* which to some extent leaves the characteristics of the human body. The spectrum of figurative transition between human and nonhuman is also explored in the works of Takahashi Naohiro (born 1991), who used to make the sculptures referring to monsters or heroes of “tokusatsu” including *Kamen Rider. Pretend to Be a Pretender* (fig.6)

Fig. 5: Washimi Yusuke, *bind*, 2022. Two channel video, 55 sec (endless loop).



Fig.6: Takahashi Naohiro,
Pretend to Be a Pretender,
2021-22. Painted on wood, hose,
dimensions variable.
Photo by Ueda Yoko.

suggests that a figure of a two-dimensional character and a three-dimensional human body imitate each other in the dismembered but loosely connected condition.

This double body might remind us of the difference between “Kyara” and “character” proposed by Ito Go. Regarding the expression of manga, Ito defines “Kyara” as what is drawn by simple lines and just hints at personality, which is not only independent of individual text, but also traverses multiple texts without losing its identical sense of presence. Thus “Kyara” is able to retain its identity if its form is variably altered between derivative works. But this “identity” as the intensity of the sense of presence would not correspond to what represents a personality, which we would rather find in “character” limitedly living in the depicted context of a work. “Character” confines a figure into individual narratives, in spite of the fact that it is preceded by and created on the basis of “Kyara” (Ito, 2005).

Pretend to Be a Pretender is a sculptural figure, which differs from manga in their structure and temporality, so it is not able to directly adapt Ito’s discussion to the work. However, it is telling that the double body, which can rearrange its bodily posture by activating the play of the tubular and pliable skeleton, suggest the potentially mutative behavior of one person like “Kyara.” It might be compared to our condition where we remain the same person identified by a specific name, while our body tends to be structured each time through relational and selective experience and deviate from a specific character.

As Narumi Hiroshi puts it regarding cosplay, the attempt to imitate another figure inhabiting a fictional world is not the act of repressing one's sense of self to adapt to social reality. In cosplay, which is distinguished from disguise, identity is not what is passively assigned but something with which one "plays" to examine the differences between one and others. According to Narumi, "one of the aims of dressing up is to become oneself through becoming the other. The process of accepting the inscription (the Other) onto the body like a tattoo as one's own possessions is of importance." (Narumi, 2009, p. 16)

Conclusion

Especially when the object to imitate is a fictional character, it would be difficult for us to fully identify with it, for it does not exist in the ordinary sense. Probably, there is not any final end for structuring one's body and, the proximity to an ideal image is only partially acquired. But the thing is, it is this ambiguous spectrum of proximity and distance that the sense of real inhabits.

As regards sculptural imagination, some works examined in the present essay seem to foreground the ambiguity through mutative arrangement of bodies. They would have no truck with, or build ironical relationships with, the following: the attitude of repelling the structural operation in favor of the contemplative "as-it-is" mode of opened encounter, the figure fully identified with a specific "character", the imagery of the amorphous matrix as a maternal origin from which forms should be differentiated, physicality demanded to be rewarded by relying on transcendent depth. The prominent practices have explored the real sense of bodies in facing their partial and porous status. This might accompany some anxiety, but they would not resort to reactionary wholism to resolve it. Rather, it would be the play with surfaces, in their ambiguous thickness, that brings potential behaviors of figures into activation ■

Reference

- Ajootian, A. (1997). The only happy couple: Hermaphrodites and gender. In A. O. Koloski-Ostrow, & C. L. Lyons (Eds.), *Naked truths: Women, sexuality, and gender in classical art and archaeology* (pp. 220-242). Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1989, November). Foucault and the paradox of bodily inscriptions. *The journal of philosophy*, 86 (11), 601-607.
- Funakoshi, K. (2015). Invisible images, new forms (S. N. Anderson, Trans.). In *Funakoshi Katsura: The Sphinx in myself* [Exhibition catalogue] (p. 9). Kyuryudo Art Publishing Co., Ltd.
- Getsy, D. J. (2015). *Abstract bodies: Sixties sculpture in the expanded field of gender*. Yale University Press.

- Haraway, D. J. (1991). A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century. In *Simians, cyborgs, and women: The reinvention of nature* (pp. 149-181). Free Association Books & Routledge. (Original work published 1985).
- Herder, J. G. (2002). *Sculpture: Some observations on shape and form from Pygmalion's creative dream* (J. Gaiger, Trans. & Ed.). The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1778).
- Ishihara, T. (2012, January 19). *Ishihara Tomoaki ōraru hisutorī: 2008-nen 10-gatsu 12-nichi* [The oral history of Ishihara Tomoaki on October 12th, 2008] [Interview by T. Ikegami & C. Makiguchi]. Oral History Archives of Japanese Art. https://oralarthistory.org/archives/ishihara_tomoaki/interview_01.php
- Ito, G. (2005). *Tezuka is dead: Postmodernist and modernist approaches to Japanese manga*. NTT Publishing. Co., Ltd.
- Koshimizu, S., Sekine, N., Suga, K., Narita, K., Yoshida, K., Lee, U. (1970, February). 'Mono' ga hiraku atarashii sekai ['Mono' opens a new world]. *Bijutsu techō* [Art notebook], 22 (324), 34-55.
- Kohmoto, S., & Nanjo, F. (1989). Foreword. In E. Osaka & K. Kline (Eds.), *Against nature: Japanese art in the eighties* [Exhibition catalogue] (p. 12). Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, New York University, the MIT List Visual Arts Center, & The Japan Foundation.
- Lee, U. (1970, February). Deai o motomete [In search of encounter]. *Bijutsu techō* [Art notebook], 22 (324), 14-23.
- Minemura, T. (1978, September). Gendai chōkoku o kangaeru 1: Hajime ni kasetu ari [Considering contemporary sculpture 1: In the beginning there is a hypothesis]. *monthly magazine SCULPTURE*, (20), 10-17.
- Minemura, T. (1979, May). Gendai chōkoku o kangaeru 8: Jitsuzai o daikō shita mono [Considering contemporary sculpture 8: Things on behalf on the real]. *monthly magazine SCULPTURE*, (28), 46-53.
- Minemura, T. (1986). What was Mono-ha? (Jean Campignon, Trans.). In *Mono-ha* [Exhibition catalogue] (n.p.). Kamakura Gallery.
- Minemura, T. (1993). Between hands staying and hands trying to go beyond (T. Matsutani, Trans.). In *What is the Katamari sculpture?: Here begins a counter-attack against twentieth century's visualism* [Exhibition catalogue] (pp. 8-12). The Ohara Foundation.
- Mori, K. (2024). Keishōka no mōment: Fujiwara Ayato no Zōka—Planets on the Planet— ni tsuite” [The moment of embodiment: On Fujiwara Ayato's *Images—Planets on the Planet—*]. In the handout of *Ayato Fujiwara: Figurative Structures* at PARCEL (n.p.).

- Nagai, S. (2023). Atogaki [Postscript]. In *Solaya Nagai 2013-2023* (p. 69). Mirai kōbō II-2.3.
- Nakahara, K. (2014). Interview: Kodai Nakahara × Takahiro Kamimura. [Interview by T. Kamimura]. In *Kodai Nakahara* (pp. 160-178). BankART1929.
- Narumi, H. (2009). Kasō suru aidentitī [Identity to dress up]. In H. Narumi (Ed.), *Kosupure suru shakai: Sabukaruchā no shintai bunka [The cosplay society: Subculture and body culture]* (pp. 8-23). Serica Syobo.
- Nawa, K. (2022). *Kohei Nawa: Aether*. Sandwich & Pace Publishing.
- Potts, A. (2000). *The Sculptural imagination: Figurative, modernist, minimalist*. Yale University Press.
- Saeborg. (November 2017). Interview 4: Saeborg [Interview by H. Nariai]. *Bijutsu techō [Art notebook]*, 69 (1061), 46-51.
- Saijo, A. (2022). Sakka suteitomento [Artist's statement]. In the press release of *Akane Saijo: Phantom Body* at ARTCOURT Gallery (n.p.).
- Shibukawa, M. (2022, December 31). *Sengetsu no ippon: Maeda Kasumi + Toyoshima Sayaka Yawarakai tsue o oku Hiratai me de noboru [Last month's one work: Maeda Kasumi + Toyoshima Sayaka's Put a Soft Cane, Climb With Flat Eyes]*. Engeki saikyō ron-ing.
https://www.engekisaikyoron.net/lm1202211_shibukawa/
- Toya, S. (2014a). Gendai bijutsu no hyōmen to haigo [The surface and background of contemporary art]. In *Toya Shigeo: Chōkoku to kotoba 1974-2013 [Toya Shigeo: Sculpture and words 1974-2013]* (pp. 184-186). The Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum. (Original work published 1994).
- Toya, S. (2014b). Mori no zō no kama no shi o megutte (4) [On the Death of the Kiln of the Elephant of the Wood (4)]. In *Toya Shigeo: Chōkoku to kotoba 1974-2013 [Toya Shigeo: Sculpture and words 1974-2013]* (pp. 166-167). The Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum. (Original work published 1989).
- Toya, S. (2014c). Mudai (2) [Untitled (2)]. In *Toya Shigeo: Chōkoku to kotoba 1974-2013 [Toya Shigeo: Sculpture and words 1974-2013]* (pp. 217-220). The Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum. (Original work published 2006).
- Washimi, Y. (2023, September 14). *Shissō suru henshin gambō: Kamen Raidā to fasshon, [Driving desire for transformation]*. Fashion Tech News. https://fashiontechnews.zozo.com/series/series_fashion_technology/yusuke_washimi?page=1
- Yamamura, H. (2003). Between the “nude” and the “tongue.” In *Kurokawa Hirotake: Symposium—Eros generating [Exhibition catalogue]* (n.p.). Fuchu Art Museum.