

What are those rocks, sitting on the working table, saying?

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Koshimizu Susumu evidently possesses a very bright intellect. Yet, he makes no active attempt to explain his artworks. As regards technique and the circumstances of a work's production, or the personal relationships that surround the work, Koshimizu falteringly imparts selected details, yet with fearsome precision. He is loath that his artwork should become descriptive. The artwork is begotten pure and void of meaning, so to speak. Having been produced, in time it is exposed to peoples' eyes in the gallery space—akin to its debut. There, “meaning,” like a garment—a bride's *tsunokakushi*¹, or a form of dazzling camouflage—continues to enshroud the work. It cannot be helped I suppose; such is the fate of what we call artworks. But this does not mean we shall peel away this thin skin yet. However trivial it may seem, whatever it is, let's leave it be. However, for the artist, who now sees the work transported from the studio into the gallery space, an irrepressible air of bewilderment lingers; like a feeling of self-conscious pride, as though marrying off one's daughter—a combination of uncertainty and satisfaction.

The work and the working table

Here I have been using the word “artwork” rather casually, but what exactly constitutes an artwork for Koshimizu? Judging from the title of the series of works that made him well-known, it seemed to be a declaration of his misgivings about separating the artwork from the production process. I thought for sure this was being propped up by the imported concepts of that deconstructivist period. However, by double-checking the dates, one realizes this was a complete misunderstanding. In the *Critique of Judgement*, enlightenment philosopher Emmanuel Kant analyzed the concept of the parergon. If the “ergon” is the work of art, then that work necessarily has its attendant brink or outer edge (“para”). That is to say, to take a readily understandable example: each picture has its frame. It is well-known that the French philosopher Jacques Derrida has taken the world by storm with his tenacious deconstruction of this subject. Does the artwork necessitate a frame, or is it the very existence of a frame, as an outline to that which lies within, which thus qualifies it as an artwork?

Derrida developed this set of problems in his 1978 work *The Truth in Painting*.² Yet, despite being first taken up by a contemporary French philosopher, by 1974 at the very latest, with his work on the Working Table series, Koshimizu had begun developing a theory of the parergon through artworks—or rather, through the business of questioning what constituted an artwork. This was not an ontology, a theory of being; it was poiesis—a theory of becoming. In fact, following Kant's discussion of the autonomy of the artwork, artworks began to be defined separately, as independent from the tools of their production. Working in the mode of the *opus operatum*, necessitated breaking away from a *modus operandi*, an operational method.³ As long as traces of the production process remained, the work could not be considered finished, it became a condition for the autonomy of the artwork to do away with the presence of tools and their restrictive qualities. When Michelangelo carved the statue of David in marble, apparently his patron, the Pope, pointed out that the statue's nose had not yet been finished. Thereupon he climbed up the scaffolding, and proceeded to scatter marble dust he had been holding in his hand, to appear as though he were chiselling just as requested.

¹ The *tsunokakushi*, is the large rounded white head-dress traditionally worn by Japanese brides. Acting to partially conceal the head and face, it literally denotes that which “hides [kakushi] the horns [tsuno]”.

² Jacques Derrida, “Parergon,” *La Vérité en Peinture* (1978)

³ The way a task or work appears to someone who is working at it (*modus operandi*) as opposed to someone who considers it in hindsight, from the completed view (*opus operatum*). The latter emphasizes the finished outcome, while the former emphasizes the manner in which the task is realized over time. The author is referring to the use of this term in Pierre Bourdieu's writings, elaborated in relation to the work of Erwin Panofsky.

The presence of the scaffolding, chisel, and unused stone, meant that from the first it could not be considered a finished artwork. Here the scattering of marble dust was just like the smashing of a champagne bottle on a ship's hull when it is launched at the dock. With this ceremony the work proclaims itself to be symbolically complete.

“Za” as work in progress: the workshop as site

However, in the distinct removal of the “working tables” from the artworks they fostered, one wonders if Koshimizu was not recalling that sense of hesitation. Or perhaps, like parents marrying off their daughter, who seem to linger like shadows, this probably revealed a stubborn tenacity. This is because only if the scaffolding is removed at all costs, will the complete form of the artwork necessarily be disclosed. However, this raises the question of whether the Working Tables⁴ are like unfinished scaffolding, or else that which goes under a sculpture to articulate its existence—perhaps nothing more than pedestals. Usually, exhibition stands used for sculptures are preordained to conceal their own presence, being there to show off the artwork instead. They become like a buffer that separates the artwork from everyday life. ‘Pedestal’ denotes the foot (*ped*) of that which stands (*stall*); which one might perceive as the comparative prejudice toward feet in opposition to the head. During the Meiji period, ornamental objects that had previously been displayed in the *tokonoma* alcove or had adorned *suhamas* display stands, were forced to part from those places to which they had hitherto belonged, so as to be transformed into modern sculptures, and thus seek the status of autonomous artworks.⁵ This exactly parallels the move initiated by the poet Masaoka Shiki, to modernise forms of *haiku* poetry by repudiating the collaborative linked-verses of *haikai renga* so as to make individual *haiku* sections into autonomous poems. Neglected here were the concepts of the *za*, the literary group that established the *renga* linked-verses, and in the case of the plastic arts, the *daiza*⁶—a kind of pedestal or platform, that had been their foundation. If one follows modern Western values from that time, then such a bold assertion by “platforms,” which were never even intended to be seen in the main work, would inevitably seem an extreme perversion of priorities, a case of putting the cart before the horse.

Koshimizu's Working Tables additionally demonstrate not only a careful selection of natural wood as their material but also a sophistication that almost puts actual functional desks and tables to shame. In the Western world, this thing called material is usually despised as it is seen merely as a means of assisting the head to achieve a figurative outcome. In woodworking the grain is ignored, in ceramics the texture of the clay is not taken into account. Koshimizu rejects such a crude approach, attempting to capitalise instead on the unique properties inherent in natural materials. While his attitude resembles a typical professional woodworker, he is unequivocally indifferent to the workman's usual pursuit of precision for the sake of it, i.e. making technical skill an end in itself. Here we see a practical, functional manner of working, foreign to autonomous artistic values, yet retaining a plastic roughness that resists being classified as standard applied arts or crafts. This baffling coexistence of these two aspects completely deviates from “pure artwork,” seeming to enhance the impression of the work as impure or out-of-place. Koshimizu's Working Tables refuse to become either artworks or furniture; while displaying an enigmatic aura, they forcibly intrude

⁴ *Sagyō dai* can mean a pedestal or even workbench type structure. As the title of Koshimizu's series of works it is commonly translated as “Working Table,” referring to an ongoing group of works by that title.

⁵ Toshiyuki Ōkuma, “Between Sculpture and Arts and Crafts: Ivory ‘Okimono’ in the Meiji era,” *History of Japanese Ivory Carving* (1996), pp.199-203. Also, “Kindai Okimono-kō (Reflection on Modern Japanese Pedestals),” *One Current of Modern Japanese Sculpture* (1996), pp.58-62.

⁶ Also referred to as *za* in Japanese. Regarding such parallels between art and poetry, see Shigemi Inaga, “What is Arts and Crafts?” *Kōgei*, inaugural issue (1995), pp.13-18; revised and developed, in Japanese, in Shigemi Inaga (ed.), “In View of Deconstructing Arts and Crafts—in the Guise of an Introduction,” *Traditional Japanese Arts & Crafts: A Reconsideration from Inside and Outside Kyoto* (2006), pp.17-32.

into the value-neutral, sacred exhibition space known as the white cube. Moreover, doing so from the position of a “work-in-progress,” they deny the concept of completion.

Under construction—this was Japan as the writers Natsume Sōseki and Mori Ōgai witnessed it at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet, such scenes at other worksites since then must have left a Western audience suspicious, wondering if these could be artworks at all. It must have seemed “a reckless act,” tantamount to abandoning the works in an overly unfinished and transitional state. Looking back now that we are well into the first decade of the twenty-first century, this was evidently an attempt to revive the origin of *za*, which the hundred-year period of Westernised modernity had neglected. Hence the Working Table was a meticulous device to reveal the fallacy of autonomous plasticity, brimming with the intention to listen closely to the voices of the accumulated mass of things contained therein.

Vessels, hollows and contents

Koshimizu Susumu subsequently became deeply concerned with container-like vessels in the late 1980s. What does this imply? If one follows Kant’s theory again, this philosopher from Königsberg defined the standard of art to be autonomous from, or even disinterested in, social functionality. Taking ceramics as an easy example: adhering to modern Western values, functional vessels used practically in everyday life cannot be accepted as artworks. To the extent that such items are functionally useless, so they manifest their effect as art objects, and hence are classed as objects of investment in the art market. Unless they are ceramic objects completely lacking the function of containers, they cannot be regarded autonomous artworks. What Koshimizu must have originally been learning as a sculptor was to produce such independent three-dimensional artworks according to this code of autonomy. Based on this, Kant’s definition of “dis-interested-ness,” one would not be able to refute the criticism that vessels which can be filled with water hark back to a world before art. According to the original modern Western definition, such works clearly possesses a mode of being that would be unacceptable as an artwork.

It suddenly strikes me: the concaved, curved vessels that are supposed to be used to serve something, dig into the surface of the Working Tables, leaving traces here and there. The works in this exhibition are no exception. The two thick wooden plates, set opposite each other, each lumbered from a huge piece of timber, were covered with 1800 metal sheets: first with a layer of silver-leaf, to which sheets of black-leaf (made by sulphur-oxidizing silver), were further applied with varnish. Seven irregularly shaped wooden upper plates with the outlines of wooden trunks were placed on top of the larger plates. Dug indentations are spread over the polished surface, and various kinds of rocks that the artist collected in Omogo valley, on the island of Shikoku, sit in these shallow hollows. On one side, whitish volcanic rocks, while on the other side, colourful metamorphic rocks—while keeping their distance, so as not to quarrel, both sides seem to have taken up residence on the spot where they sit. These myriad types of rocks were originally born from the folding of the central tectonic belt that traverses the island of Shikoku, which left them scattered side by side on the riverbed. Now these rocks are nestled snugly into their hollows on the Working Tables, perfectly fitted according to their respective shapes. They sit, majestically, as if staking their claim on these hollows as their own territories.

An attachment to boat shapes; a preoccupation with rope

Yet, the rocks, utterly unrefined, sit there impudently, with a repelling presence, making it almost impossible to personify them. There are fourteen of these rocks (or selfish vagabonds) in total, which the artist collected on the spur of the moment at the foot of Mount Ishizuchi.

This number is possibly to vie with the rock garden of the Ryoan-ji temple, in Kyoto, which Koshimizu does not seem to be particularly fond of. Koshimizu's rocks however, are unshaped, unknown, lacklustre rocks—nothing like the world famous Ryoan-ji rocks. The seven thick camphor wooden plates, which are being illegally occupied, against their will, by this band of rocky outlaws, are each curved at the top and placed together to form a boat shape. They are too low to be Western style tables and too high to be low *chabudai* style Japanese tables.⁷ They look slightly snobbish to be chairs on which one might nonchalantly take a seat, yet do not seem to mind being sat on all the same. If one exercises their imagination, they appear to be uncomfortable, unstable wooden benches placed around the small ship's cabin, but unfortunately the above-mentioned fourteen hard-headed passengers, although inanimate objects, sit proudly atop the benches as though claiming they were there first.

Koshimizu has had a consistent attachment to boat-like shapes. The artist explains this might be due to his coming from Uwajima city (known for the revolt of the warrior Fujiwara Sumitomo, d. 941 CE). In 1990 Koshimizu made a work consisting of wooden keels on a working table, and another work consisting of ten colourful fluttering flag-like objects, reminiscent of marine flags or sailcloth. He also once made a long rectangular boat-shaped work, filled to the brim with water. Moreover, the artist has also spoken of his experience in the floods that hit the township of Kawai (now merged with Furukawa city) in Gifu prefecture, causing mud and driftwood to fill the local dam. Amid the subsequent discussions to build a park as part of the reconstruction plans, Koshimizu proposed to make an ark out of the remaining driftwood. Unfortunately his plan was not realised at that time, but his idea has been reincarnated as several bronze works, beginning with “Boat on Mt Ararat” (1992), which is now displayed outdoors in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. In his classes at the Kyoto City University of Arts, Koshimizu even built two Japanese style boats with his students. This illustrates the extent to which he has been preoccupied with boat-like forms. The boat shape may represent a boat-like coffin, which transports departed souls in the afterlife. The strands of hemp rope placed side by side, according to the artist, take on the intermediary role of a rope ferry, connecting people and nature. Rough packing ropes being buried in the earth and sand of an unpaved, muddy road, as people and carts pass by—this is apparently a primal scene in the artist's imaginary.

The gallery as an ark, and its passengers

Koshimizu's idea, demonstrated here, was to make the whole gallery space resemble a ship's cabin. From this work, completed as he approaches his sixty-sixth year, one can sense his current goal as well as one of the focal points for him to consolidate his preceding interests. The Working Tables become synecdochic of vessels filled with water, while the boat shape, comprising seven Working Tables, which seem like buoys bobbing on the water, transforms the work into an entire wooden ship. The ship's cabin has now expanded to fill the entire inner walls of the gallery, revealing the origin of that mechanism we now call “installation”. In the past, artworks existed as binding points that focused aesthetic contemplation, in a state referred to as pure visibility. In fact, the autonomy of an artwork as an ergon is guaranteed in reality only thanks to the surrounding parergon, which turns out to be the working-table or matrix engendering the work, and yet also its ostensorium, revealing that the ergon as such is nothing but a “figure” whose status is sustained by the supporting “ground,” which acts like a sort of virtual focal point, destined for self-erasure, just like the *kuroko* puppeteers in the

⁷ On “chabudai,” see Jordan Sand, “Chabudai,” in *Impressions: The Journal of the Japanese Art Society of America*, No.30 (2009). Also, Shigemi Inaga, “Object and Image: Exploring Visual and Material Culture in Japan,” in *Cross Sections* No.3, The Kyoto National Museum of Modern Art (forthcoming, 2010).

Bunraku theatre.⁸ The artist affirms that the black of the Working Tables represents ‘black snow’, as an inversion of the pure white of the falling snow that accumulates in the garden. Alternatively, a display of reversed photo negatives and positives alongside these Working Tables may well have helped in clarifying the artist’s intentions. That is in fact because, through production, or the Working Tables, the artwork emerges as a function of having been turned inside-out.

Because of the black clothes they wear the *kuroko* stagehands responsible for moving puppets in *ningyō-jōruri* puppet theatre are, on the contrary, emboldened in their mute stage presence. The main puppeteer presents his unadorned face in a deadpan expression; indeed he appears for the sake of denying the meaning of appearance. Koshimizu’s Working Table gilded with silver and black leaf now asserts its presence by its subdued tone, like the *kuroko*, while the rocks sitting on it expose their fair-complexions, like the main puppeteer, or they run rampant on the Working Table, as though it were a stage, in the place of colourful puppets. They eventually extend the outer edge of the artwork as ergon, yet the stage setting, as the parergon that highlights the brink of the artwork, expands, spreading out into the entire gallery space. A certain method of viewing in which one focuses one’s gaze on the work as a microcosm is thus rendered ineffectual, becoming instead the reverse—the artwork, as an environment, surrounds and penetrates the viewer. Precisely in this sense we see that ‘installation’, a construction popular since the end of the 1970s, embraced this perverse plan at its conception.

This turns inside out the fictitious theory of the autonomy of the artwork, a theory that Kant went to so much trouble to try and fabricate. Degrading the parergon to the mere additional elements or parasitic existence on the artwork in fact runs the risk of contradictorily undermining the necessary conditions for an artwork to be autonomous. This was exactly the mechanism Derrida used to examine and dismantle Kant’s theory, using the deconstructive method. That being the case, then surely what has clearly been shown as perverse was in fact the illusion of autonomy. At the beginning of the 1970s, just before the opening of the Osaka Expo, with its theme of “Progress and Harmony for Mankind,” coinciding with the end of the modernist period, didn’t Koshimizu’s Working Tables unpretentiously yet tenaciously see through this dilemma of mistaken priorities? Artworks that should have crystallised the aesthetic order did exist. The operating table that serves the creation of such artworks lives on well beyond the functional, or ontological lifespan of the artwork itself. It surfaces as the primordial matrix, an absent place—*khora*—being both womb and wet-nurse, from which the artwork articulates into existence.

From the Hinayana ark to the Mahayana hut

In any case, following the Great Flood, it was probably always asking too much to expect that pairs of all species be taken aboard the drifting ark toward the peak of Mt Ararat. Yet, what happens once the ark, this cloistered sanctuary, has released its sideboards and transformed itself into a Working Table on which to carry out the ‘Good Work’⁹ of the Creator? Nature as environment and boat as artwork, forming a harmonious whole, prove they are functions (in the mathematical sense) of mutually interchangeable entities.

There was once a Zen monk named Yamada Mumon (1900-1988), the twenty-sixth head of the Myōshin-ji temple, whose easy-to-follow preaching gained wide popularity. He

⁸ By comparison, see Jean-Claude Lebensztejn, *Annexes-de l’oeuvre d’art* (1999), p. 187. The puppeteers of the *Bunraku* marionette theater have been famously analyzed by Roland Barthes in his *Empire des Signes* (1970), as a willful antithesis to Paul Claudel’s lack of understanding in the *Ningyō-jōruri*.

⁹ A late 16th Century Japanese translation of Christian literature used the term “*Santos no Go-sagyō*” to translate “The Acts of the Saints” (“Go” being an honorific prefix). Here the author intentionally evokes this parallel, to show that “go-sagyō” contains the same “sagyō” as in Koshimizu’s “Sagyō-dai,” or Working Table.

retains a reputation as a noted monk of the modern period. One line from his collected lecture notes, “When gathered and tied together, grass becomes a hut; when untied, it returns to its original form, a field”. Sekine Nobuo took Mumon’s book along with him when he went to study in Italy in 1971 and found an ideal state in this recurrent act of tying and untying. In Euro-america the act of tying itself confirms the meaning of an artwork, and people there work hard to make artworks last in institutions made for conservation, such as museums. On the other hand, I as an Oriental person, have a philosophy that what was once “tied” should later be allowed to be released. Sekine’s work “Phase-Mother Earth” (*Isō daichi*, which Inaga translates as “Topology Earth,” as the work consists of topological transposition), which earned him his place in Art History, consisted of a cylindrical hole dug from the ground and a tower made from the excavated earth, positioned next to the hole, in the exact shape and size of the hole. After the exhibition, Sekine filled the hole with the displaced earth once again, allowing the site to return to its original state, i.e. nothingness. Sekine seems to have realised that this revelation constituted his artistic stance.

When they rented a room in the accommodation at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art with an open-air sculpture park in Denmark, Koshimizu staunchly confronted this view of Sekine, his sworn friend, but neither side yielded in the subsequent discussion. This was because there was another line paired to that of Mumon mentioned above. Koshimizu recalls it as: “When gathered and tied together, grass becomes a hut; yet it can again become a field, just like that, without being untied.” For Koshimizu, the goal should be beyond the matter of artificially tying and untying. The worldly desire to include nature in the artwork, and thus gain a result, can only be a “Hinayana boat”—i.e. a process that aspires to the success of the ego. On the other hand, in the case of a “Mahayana boat,” which aims to save all living things, the state of being tied is itself equal to the value of untouched nature. This offers an insight into the Working Tables, that they function on a different level from the topological transposition on which *Phase-Mother Earth* was conceived; permitting one even to suggest, perhaps, that the Working Table left idle and neglected after creating the artwork, represents a state of untouched nature. Such is the allegorical language used by an artist who dislikes explaining his works.

By removing the outline of that autonomous existence called the “artwork,” people achieve a state of non-obstructed ease¹⁰ where they can overcome the fear of heteronomy. These Working Tables, where various lines of force intersect, might at times attract some possessed “being”; at times some “thing” might suddenly descend on it like a meteorite; or at other times some “entity” may emerge from beneath it, like a spirit.¹¹ At the same time, these Working Tables maintain a dry physicality free from the eerie atmosphere common to sorcery and magic. The carefree cheerfulness demonstrated in being “a field, just like that” inevitably leads to the serendipitous meeting of things.¹² And there is the artist, listening patiently to the muted conversations of these rocks, which have gathered on his Working Tables.

Following a visit to the artist’s studio in Kita-kutsukake, Nishikyo-ku, Kyoto (18 January 2010)

Translated and annotated by Olivier Krischer

¹⁰ This “freedom” suggests a Buddhist sense of a state free from obstructions between will and action.

¹¹ These three ideas can be expressed in the Japanese homophone *mono*. On the notion of *mono* encompassing physical, personal (persona) and spiritual dimensions, see Shigemi Inaga, “Spirits Emanating from Objecthood - Or the Destiny of In-formed Materiality,” *Monokeiro* (2010), pp.64-82.

¹² See Kuki Shūzō, *Le problème de la contingence*, translation and introduction by Hisayuki Omodaka (1966).