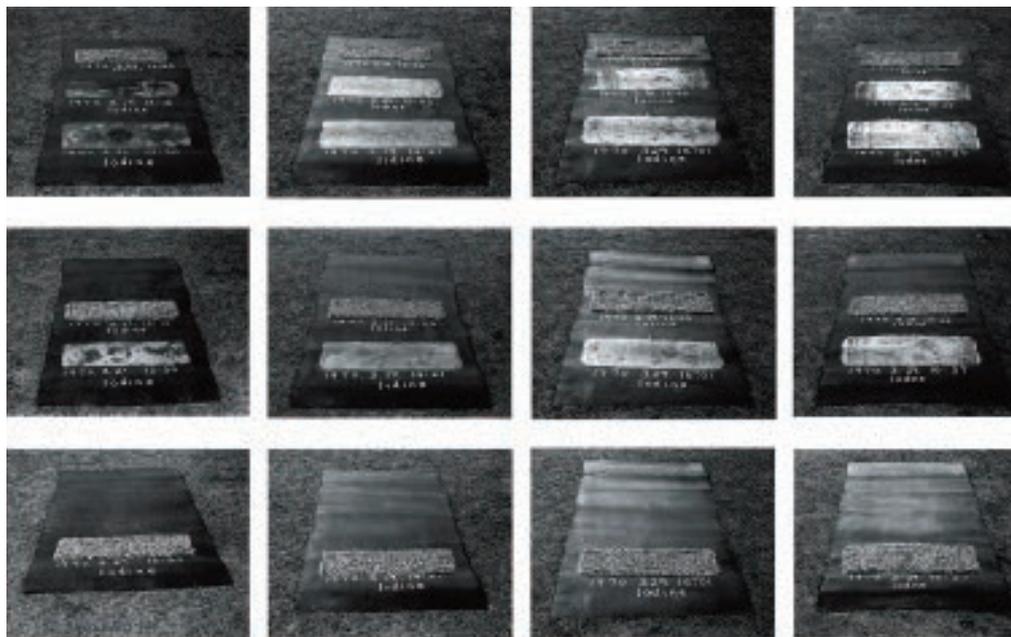




Hitoshi Nomura



Stretching Mortal Time

BY JOYCE BECKENSTEIN

Hitoshi Nomura, one of Japan's most esteemed artists, though he is comparatively unknown in the West, finally received significant attention in the United States with two fall 2015 exhibitions: a one-person show at Fergus McCaffrey Gallery in Chelsea and inclusion in "For a New World to Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography 1968–1979," curated by Yasufumi Nakamori, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and at the Japan Society and Grey Gallery in New York. These exhibitions continue a new-millennium interest in examining the international nature of the postwar avant-garde, something art history has treated as a primarily Western phenomenon. In this revaluation, Nomura emerges as a unique practitioner of experimental genres—unique because of the unusual way in which, figuratively and literally, he sculpts time.

For most people, time unfolds as durational moments measured by one's watch—equivocal units that for earthly mortals are relative to where on the globe one stands and how well one's watch is working. Nomura invents and re-invents sculpture, photography, performance, installation, and conceptual art to stretch ordinary "mortal" time toward its mystifying and spiritual cosmic edge. He's a patient man, unflinching when a work takes 20 or more years to realize. And though much of what he creates shares the pared-down forms, anti-forms, and unconventional abstractions of Western 20th-century art, Nomura comes from a distinctly different place than his Western compatriots, a place where science meets Zen and where Einstein meets Picasso.

Opposite: Installation view with (foreground) *3D Analemma*, 2008, bronze, marble, and granite, 201 x 160 x 25 cm.; and (background) *12 Spins*, 1980–2008, sequence of 12 color photographs, 50 x 60 cm. Above: *Iodine*, March 29, 1970. Sequence of 12 black and white photographs, 35 x 43 cm. each.

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Nomura was raised in a traditional middle-class family where, he says, “Drinking tea meant tea ceremony, and my mother played the koto. Our tansu chests were filled with hanging scrolls (*jiku*)...I started thinking it would really be interesting if I could draw like that.”¹ When interviewed through a translator for this article, Nomura added that, as a young student, he loved nature and planned to study science until he “succumbed to temptation” and studied art instead.² He attended Kyoto City University of the Arts, a progressive school where “they didn’t tell us what to do. We learned by watching, then doing, though we were required to learn to work in traditional media such as marble and wood.” Beyond that, the school was known for its openness to a young artist’s fresh ideas.

Nomura’s mentors were nevertheless disarmed by his MFA thesis project, *Tardiology* (1968–69), a nearly 28-foot-tall stack of four corrugated boxes placed outside the Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art. Unlike monumental sculpture meant to transcend time, this construction, hewn from a fragile, banal material, was planned to fail, to cave in under its own weight, yield

to gravity, and submit to wind, rain, and time. For four days, Nomura serially photographed his physically awkward tower, documenting its crane-assisted construction, its simple structural support system, and its demise as it gradually tumbled and buckled its way into a heap of garbage cardboard piled on the ground.

Where did this idea come from? Nomura himself isn’t sure. As Yuri Mitsuda suggests, *Tardiology* emerged within the context of the tumultuous mid-’60s, when Japanese dissidents reacted to the renewal of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (Anpo) maintaining America’s military presence in Japan and the country’s increased involvement in the Vietnam War. For many, Expo ’70, the Osaka World’s Fair celebrating Japan’s technological prowess, was a smoke-screen to deflect pervasive political unrest. The reaction among artists was to reject convention and create something new.³ But this shift from the traditional to the non-traditional as a call for change extends back further in Japanese art to the postwar Gutai Art Association, a collective founded by Yoshihara Jiro in 1954 that produced many unprecedented works of

process, environmental, and performance art. Later, the Mono-Ha (School of Things, 1967–69), a loose group of mostly Tokyo artists, made anti-Modernist works—usually from basic materials such as glass, rocks, metal, and wood—that were meant to be destroyed.

Nomura says that while he was peripherally aware of these politically inspired avant-garde trends as a student, he was not a political activist, and living in Kyoto further isolated him from new artistic movements. Mostly, he says, he knew of contemporary art through printed material such as *Art Bijutsu Tech*, a journal begun in the 1940s that reported on art in Japan and in the West.

In an age of warp-speed technological innovation, it is possible to view Nomura’s energies as being fueled less by political unrest and more by the excitement that had Western artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman seeking to blur the lines between art and science. *Dry Ice* (1969) and *Iodine* (1970), coming soon after *Tardiology*, find Nomura continuing to move away from the idea of sculpture as a traditional three-dimensional





Tardiology, 1968–69. Series of 8 black and white photographs, 40 x 26.5 cm. each.

form and toward the more elusive concept of sculpting time through processes that physically transform an object's temporal life.

In *Dry Ice*, for example, a performance taking place for five days during a one-month period, Nomura weighed blocks of dry ice as they diminished in mass and placed them along three different surfaces—cardboard, rubber, and canvas mats. He recorded the weight of each sublimated ice block along with the time and date of its changed state, then set them in a new sequential position along a particular mat. *Iodine* proceeded similarly, as the substance progressed from a liquid to gas. In each case, the temporal changes left different impressions on different surfaces. Nomura recorded these sculptural performances in the form of serial photographs.

A photographic version of *Dry Ice* was included in the 1970 Tokyo Biennale “Between Man and Matter,” along with works by such emerging luminaries as Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Christo, Hans

Haacke, and Richard Serra. Andre and Sol LeWitt, fascinated by Nomura's innovation, visited with him in Kyoto and made sketches of *Iodine*. Nomura says that when the two returned to Tokyo and told art critic Yusuke Nakahara of their “discovery and encounter,” it led to the first publication of his work in *Bijutsu Tech*.

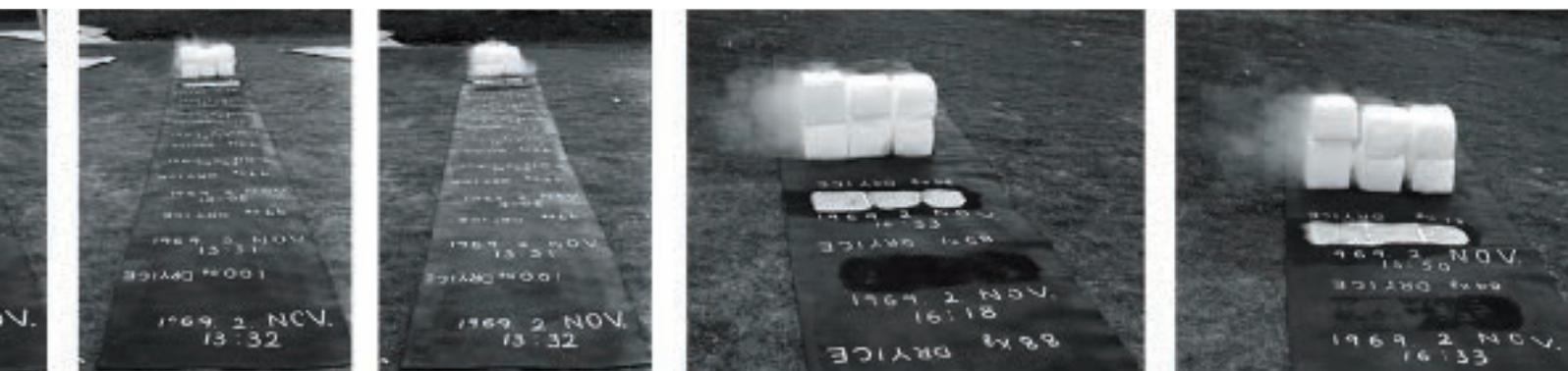
In discussing the parallels between Nomura and Western artists such as Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, and Richard Long, Martha Buskirk wonders “...what to make of the parallels.” Can they be described as a shared tendency, or is it a far more amorphous convergence, based on largely unrelated responses to historical forces that are at once globally interconnected and locally specific?²⁴ Whatever the convergences, change—political, philosophical, technological—was in the air, wafting around the globe in ways that Western art history was slow to acknowledge. In retrospect, though we may see and note certain general trends in what artists were

doing at the time, what seems more relevant is, as ever, an understanding and appreciation of each artist's uniqueness.

Nomura embraces—and expresses—time in new and multiple formats. And while one may point to any number of Postmodernist artists and movements dealing with time and genre blurs, Nomura, unlike most of them, is not and was not concerned with devising some new hybrid object. He is interested in immersing himself within the moment itself so that he can both understand his own presence relative to time and document it. In this regard, it makes sense to consider his work as an evolution of Modernism's earliest 20th-century movement—Cubism—and to follow the dots from Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, to Einstein's theories of relativity, and then on to Nomura's conceptual, Postmodernist works, such as *'moon' score* (1975–2013).

As Arthur I. Miller explained, “Einstein's temporal simultaneity matches Picasso's

Dry Ice, 2011. November 2, 1969. Sequence of 10 black and white photographs, dimensions variable.



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COWARA (Cosmic Waves & Radiation), 1987. Electromagnetic wave, horn speaker, and mixed media, 300 x 400 x 350 cm.

sky as observed from the same vantage point. With the camera shutter opened before sunrise and closed after sundown, the images capture the convex and concave lines of the sun's trajectory. For *The Sun on Latitude 35 N: Toyonaka* (1986–2010), Nomura chose a selection of these photographs from 24 years worth of images and aligned them as a three-dimensional wall-hung sculpture that replicates an analemma, an infinity-like form tracing the path that the sun makes in the sky over time. Then for *3D Analemma* (2008), he created this shape as a traditional Brancusi-like freestanding bronze sculpture.

In addition to providing three different interpretations of time/space phenomena, these works also chronicle how photography informs, questions, and disarms our visual perceptions of forms in space, and how it has contributed to the genre-bending that defines much contemporary art. *12 Spins* recalls Muybridge's serial photography and Marey's groundbreaking photographic experiments with multiple exposures: both led Picasso toward Cubism in painting and sculpture. Dadaists, Surrealists, and later artists such as Rauschenberg,

likewise explored relationships between photography and sculpture. And Peter Bunnell's 1970 MoMA exhibition "Photography Into Sculpture" introduced 23 artists who challenged categorical genres by freely incorporating photographic images within three-dimensional forms.

But again, Nomura, unlike most Western artists, was less interested in formalist contrasts than he was in finding a human and spiritual connection with the ephemeral. That's why the ice melts, the iodine turns to gas, and the evanescent solar curve exists only as a serially preserved pattern or an abstraction. Other examples include *Time Arrow: Oxygen -183° C* (1993), which presents oxygen, the life-giving substance

that we seldom see, in liquid form, appearing and disappearing as a magnificent turquoise cloud in a clear cylinder. And *COWARA* (1987) converts electromagnetic rays captured by terrestrial antennas into sound through horn speakers surreally suspended at varying heights within the space.

Nomura's work—the objects and creations that wed art to science—both enliven and elude our ordinary sense of time, bringing to mind Leonardo's lines: "The water you touch in the river is the last of the wave that has passed out of sight, the first of the wave coming in...so it is with present time."

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Notes

¹ Fergus McCaffrey, "An Interview with Hitoshi Nomura, Kyoto, Japan, 2010," in *Hitoshi Nomura, Early Works: Sculpture, Photography, Film Sound*, (New York: McCaffrey Fine Art, 2010), p. 7.

² All quotations unless otherwise noted are taken from a translator-assisted interview with Hitoshi Nomura at Fergus McCaffrey Gallery prior to the opening of his exhibition on September 9, 2015.

³ Yuri Mitsuda, "Thinking From Dates and Places," in *For A New World To Come: Experiments in Japanese Art and Photography, 1968–1979*, (New Haven and London: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2015), pp. 28–30.

⁴ Martha Buskirk, "Marking Time," in *Hitoshi Nomura, Early Works: Sculpture, Photography, Film Sound*, op cit., p. 36–37.

⁵ Arthur I. Miller, *Einstein/Picasso: Space, Time And The Beauty That Causes Havoc*, (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 208.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.