

The Entangled Sculpture of Toya Shigeo: Contact-Based Frameworks of Body and Language

Katsumata Ryo

1. From “Cadaver” to “Skin”

Toya Shigeo’s sculptures featuring the human body, such as *Lying Man* (1971) ^{cat. no. 1} and *Cadaver of Man* (1972) ^{fig. 1, p. 163}, created while he was still at university, were based on his observations of cadavers in dissection rooms. Toya soon abandoned figurative representations of the human body, and his first solo exhibition, *POMPEII·79 Part 1* (1974) ^{cat. no. 5}, shows him developing in a seemingly Minimalist direction with serial arrays of rectangular forms. However, incisions were made in these rectangular forms, which evoke sarcophagi, as would be made in an autopsy specimen.¹ In other words, the theme of a “cadaver” laid out horizontally was still present on the surface, the vulnerable “skin,” of each unit. Inside them were sequences of thin fragments resembling folds.

At the time when Toya abandoned sculpture dealing with the body, the dominant art movement in Japan was Mono-ha (the “School of Things”), composed of artists of the preceding generation. Lee Ufan, a leading figure in Mono-ha in terms of discourse as well as practice, critiqued humanistic representation of objects as detaching the objects from their concrete presence “as they are” and replacing them with “fictive images.” As an example of an “open encounter” with the world that overcomes such detachment and fabrication, Lee cited an episode involving a person walking and a puddle: the walker may suddenly stop in front of a puddle, which does not seem especially different from the others, yet for some reason causes him to “see” the vividness of the world, resulting in an open relationship of communication. According to Lee, “open encounters” such as that between the walker and the puddle come to “conscious beings... at particular places and at particular moments.”²

However, could it be that in Lee’s works combining materials such as stone, steel, and glass in their unprocessed state (“as they are”), the dimension of the “conscious being” integral to the experience of direct contact, i.e. the dimension of a particular body in a particular place, has receded—as if wary of the “fictive images” that are, after all, the product of “consciousness?” This would mean that the direct and “open” encounter, rather than being an experience of a specific form, has slipped into a bare-bones relationship in which the material object is “shown” to the viewer.

Toya saw something like this occurring with regard to Minimalism, a movement often discussed in parallel with Mono-ha. His concept of the “baroque,” which he has been pursuing intensively as his own distinctive visual language since the 2000s, seems to be grounded in this context. In Toya’s view, Minimalism “occurred when the pursuit of visual purity denied the receptivity of the tactile sense, resulting in formal terms in series of flat pictorial surfaces, smoothing out the dark folds of the baroque aesthetic.”³ Minimalism pushed “openness” to its limits by ensuring that all was visible and nothing was hidden.

By contrast, even in the “minimal” rectangular forms of *POMPEII·79 Part 1*, Toya was already concealing folds that he would later describe as “baroque” in the form of fine, skin-like undulations in the shadows of the sarcophagi. Toya’s sculpture is only possible when there is acceptance of both the open and the closed.

2. Scenes of Generation: Bodily Aspects of Language

Turning our attention again to Mono-ha’s rejection of the human capacity for representation as a

producer of “fictive images,” it seems in this context that Toya focused not only on the image itself, but also on the dynamic process of its emergence.

In *What is Beauty in Language?* (1965), Yoshimoto Takaaki explains the process of linguistic generation using the example of a prehistoric hunter who sees the sea. Before acquiring language, he would emit a sound such as *oob* as a “real reflexive response” to the visual organs’ perception of the sea. As consciousness develops, however, the sound *oob*, which is associated with that visual perception, takes on the “*texture* of consciousness.” After this stage, utterances become a “self-expression of consciousness,” and once consciousness has a stronger structure, it can utilize syllables such as *oob-mii* (*umi*, or “sea” in Japanese) as symbolic concepts and reference the image distinct from the actual object, even if one is not in a particular place, i.e. not actually seeing the sea in front of one’s eyes.⁴

The “texture of consciousness” that Yoshimoto envisions at the dawn of the language formation process evokes the tactility of touch. While the vocalizing body at this dawn was still closely tied to real, specific places (in the above example, beside the sea), language would subsequently achieve a gradual separation from place.

Varying degrees of distance between one’s own body and a physical object: this topography inherent to the establishment of language is not unrelated to Toya’s concept of sculpture. It is through the scalable form of the entanglement of these coordinates that Toya’s sculpture takes shape, and it is herein that the frameworks of language and sculpture merge. Yoshimoto presented a diagram that maps parts of speech on the two opposing axes of self-expression and indicative expression, which he proposes as the two aspects of language. Toya’s massive work *From ‘Borders’ V* (1997-98)^{cat. no. 97} is modeled on this scheme. On one side of the space is a huge hole, and on the other side a substantial form protrudes and extends.

As the concept sheet for this work indicates ^{fig. 2, p. 164}, the two opposing sides correspond to an exclamation (interjection), intensely represented in self-expression, and a noun, intensely represented in indicative expression. Exclamations are expressions of concrete and direct sensations, such as surprise or pain, which are difficult to conceptualize in terms of nouns. Unlike Mono-ha, which aimed to “sweep away the dust of conceptuality and nominality” (Sekine Nobuo),⁵ Toya does not abandon the “nominal” dimension, instead actualizing it through substantive forms. This inextricable intertwining of the realm of nouns, detached from specific places or situations, with that of exclamations, which retain a powerful sense of directness—this is what we call sculpture.⁶ This same emergent entanglement is also embodied by folded surfaces in which the interior and exterior, the open and the closed, are recombined.

3. Entangled Surfaces: Beyond the Body and the Mirror

As already hinted at in *POMPEII · 79 Part 1*, in Toya’s sculpture it is the tactile surface of the “skin” that underpins physical “contact.” The central importance of tactility to Toya’s concept of sculpture is clear from the following statement:

I believe that the original form of sculpture is based on the self as a body, or object, that unavoidably finds itself in this place. [...] One could say sculpture is that which finds its basis of independence in individualized sensations such as pain and touch.⁷

In Toya’s sculpture, however, the specific and direct “here” of the physical self – unlike centripetally structured sculpture depicting the human figure – is, paradoxically, inescapably entangled with the interiority of “here.”⁸ And this dimension of entanglement between here and there, inside and outside, is what we have come to call “surface.” As is widely known, Toya’s Woods series, launched in 1984, features multiple layers of chainsaw carving that form intricate relief-like ripples. The visible and invisible parts, the peaks and valleys, are entangled like the folds of a baroque landscape, forming interpenetrating “surfaces.” The fact that the height of the vertical units that make up the Woods series was determined by the height of Toya’s raised arm (220 cm) is evidence of a state in which the self is a connected membrane that dizzyingly alternates between interior and exterior.

It is notable that the skin-like surface mediating this alternation is the result of Toya’s abandonment of the human body (cadaver). *POMPEII · 79 Part 1* symbolically heralded the advent of this approach, and at Pompeii, the site itself, we find an example of a mediating membrane. In that ancient city, the shapes of people buried in the lava of the volcanic eruption remain as voids, and their forms were reconstructed by pouring plaster as into a mold. The edges of the voids act as membranes that support both space and material, the fictive image (negative) and the actual image (positive).

For Toya, since his early From ‘Carving’ series, the act of carving has been a metaphor that can be interpreted as a movement of the gaze. However, while the act of looking is usually performed on the premise that there is distance between the viewer and the viewed object, or between the self and the other – and for this reason the object or the body of the other are apprehended as an integrated whole – the unique characteristic of Toya’s gaze, which is involved in the physical shaping of the sculpture, is that at some level it cancels out this distance.

Jacques Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage” explains the mechanism by which the ego is established, asserting that the body, as the primordial “here,” is alienated from itself when it sees itself reflected in a mirror and the gaze falls on an object “outside of the self.”⁹ However, it may seem that Toya’s gaze ought to be located “here,” i.e., in a specific place (that of sculpture) based on contact through the skin, as opposed to the separating action of the mirror. In *Spirit Regions I* (1990)^{fig. 3, p. 164}, because glass covers the unit, there is confusion between reflection and transparency. In fact, however, it is the gaze from the outside, and the carved lines that hollow out the interior of the material, that reflect one another. It is, so to speak, a rhetorical operation that metaphorically superimposes the external and internal and removes distance from the gaze. Or, in *Viewing Doors II* (1994)^{cat. no. 87}, the act of seeing is performed by a shared lens (the eyeball) that underpins the view from both the front and the rear closely, i.e. at zero distance.

If we return to the observation that in Toya’s work both the human body (cadaver) and the mirror are oriented to be overcome on the path toward the contact-surface of the skin, it follows that the “forest” is the key to overcoming the human body and its mirror image as an external object, on the path toward the body of the self, “here.” Toya, having positioned the woods as a metaphor for “surface,” goes on to state:

The structure of a woods can be thought of as a field shared between interior and exterior. If so, “surface” as we have conceived it thus far can also be seen as a thick domain or boundary, like a woods, *rather than as a mirror*.¹⁰ (Italics mine)

Or, with Pompeii as a source, the work speaks of pleasures that are inextricably linked to the agony of encroaching death, drawing on the image of one’s own body filling a void so tightly that it is unable to move.

It is suffocating and painful, but at the same time I am aware of my entire body from head to toe, and I feel the ecstasy of touching and being touched all over my body. The tactile sensation flows into me. The form of the flowing tactile sensation is *not that of a human body*, but of a woods... I become the same size as the woods. I feel as if I have become a sculpture, and the woods no longer terrify me.¹¹ (Italics mine)

The contours of the body are ascertained not by looking in the mirror, but “here,” at the site of contact. However, the body is already halfway out of the possession of the self and in the hands of something else (simultaneously “touching” and “being touched”). Therefore, whether that of the self or another, it can never return to the image of an independent body with centripetal properties. In Toya’s work, the independent human body has indeed been abandoned. What followed this abandonment, however, was not the totality of openness sought by Mono-ha’s critique of the human and of “fictive images.” Rather, Toya saw the creation of a sense of contact in the interplay between real and fictive images, open and closed, inside and outside, possessing and relinquishing. As the membrane of skin or the outline of a void, the body, unique and specific, endures.

(Art critic)

1. Haito Masahiko sees elements in *POMPEII*·79 *Part1* and Viewing Doors II that can be compared to “coffins.” See the following: Haito Masahiko, “*Mirareru tobira II* no kyōkai o anfuramansu ni keiyu shite: 1990nen ikō no toya shigeo” [Boundaries of Viewing Doors II seen through infra-mince: Shigeo Toya works after 1990], *Toya Shigeo: mori no hida no yukue*, [Toya Shigeo: Folds, Gazes, and Anima of the Woods], exh. cat. (Aichi: Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, 2003), 22–39.
2. Cf. Lee Ufan, “*Deai o Motomete*” [The Search For Encounter], *Deai o Motomete: gendaibijutsu no shigen* [The Search For Encounter: Primal Origins of Contemporary Art] (Tokyo: Misuzu Shobō, 2016).
3. Shigeo Toya, “Chōkoku no ashita ha dotchida” [What is the Future of Sculpture], *Toya Shigeo chōkoku to kotoba 1974–2003* [Works and words of Shigeo Toya 1974–2003] (Shizuoka: Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum, 2014), 269.
4. Cf. Yoshimoto Takaaki, *Gengo ni totte bi toha nanika I* [What is beauty in language?], (Tokyo: Kadokawa Publishing, 1990).
5. Comment by Sekine Nobuo at the following roundtable discussion: “‘Mono’ ga hiraku atarashii sekai” [Mono Opens a New Worlds], *Bijutsu techō* (February 1970): 40.
6. Tanaka Masayuki analyzes *From ‘Borders’ V* in terms of perceptual and semantic visibility/invisibility, referring to Yoshimoto’s linguistic theory as well as the works of Alberto Giacometti and Jacques Lacan. See the following: Masayuki Tanaka, “Sonzai heno toi: Toya Shigeo to ‘araware’ no chōkoku” [Questions of Existence: Shigeo Toya and Sculpture of ‘Emergence’], *Toya Shigeo—Arawareru chōkoku* [Shigeo Toya—Sculpture to Emerge], exh. cat. (Tokyo: Musashino Art University Museum & Library, 2017), 29–39.
7. Toya Shigeo (Interview), “‘Topos, Ethnos—Gendaibijutsu ni okeru bunka no hazama o megutte’ ten ni yosete” [On the “Topos, Ethnos—On the gap between cultures in contemporary art’ Exhibition], Vangi Sculpture Garden Museum, *op.cit.*, 179.
8. Sawayama Ryo notes contrasts between external and internal voids in Toya’s works, and sees this as linked to the methodology of “coexistence of two opposing regimes.” This intersectionality deviates from the centripetal nature of classical sculpture depicting the human figure, in which external form is reflexively derived from internal structure, and is interesting in relation to Toya’s sculptural language, which takes “surface” as its point of departure. See the following: Sawayama Ryo, “Fukusū no medeiumu: 80 nendai toiu kōsaten” [Multiple Media: the ’80s as Intersection], *Bijutsu techō* (June 2019): 40–45.
9. Cf. Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I,” *Écrits* (New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 2007).
10. Toya Shigeo, “‘Mori no Shi’ ni tsuite” [On *Death of Woods*], *Gendai no me* (March 1991): 5. (The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo)
11. Satani Shugo ed., “Toya Shigeo ansoroji” [Writings by Shigeo Toya], *Toya Shigeo: Yama-mori-mura* [Toya Shigeo: Mountain-Woods-Village], exh. cat. (Ehime: Kuma Museum of Art, 1994), 163.

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写真提供

戸谷成雄

ケンジタキギャラリー シュウゴアーツ
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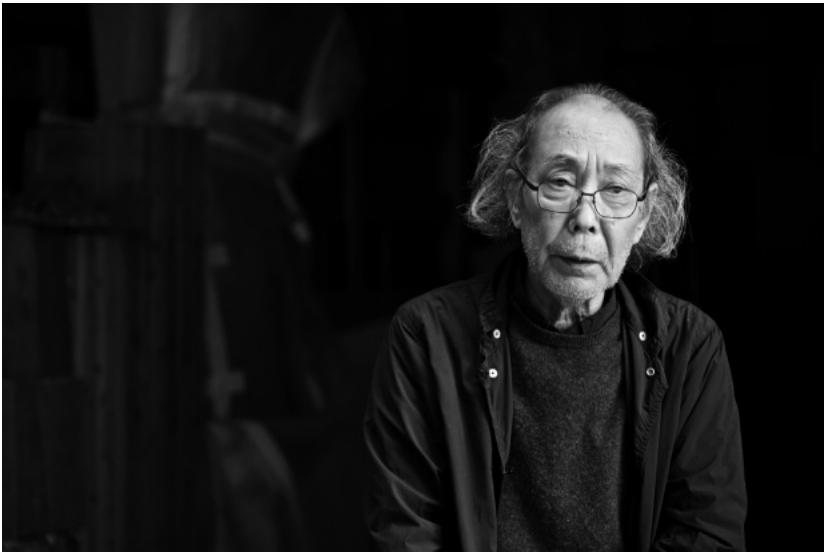
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戸谷成雄 彫刻
Toya Shigeo: Sculpture

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