

Abstraction Matters

Abstraction Matters:

Contemporary Sculptors in Their Own Words

Edited by

Cristina Baldacci, Michele Bertolini,
Stefano Esengrini and Andrea Pinotti

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PREFACE

ANDREA PINOTTI

Terminology in art theory, art history and art criticism appears to suffer from a chronic condition. Many of the fundamental notions and concepts that structure theoretical, historical and critical discourse are felt to be strongly inadequate because of their vagueness, polysemy, or the heavy semantic burden they bear from a century-long tradition, overloaded with its ideological and cultural prejudices. Yet despite all the comprehensive debates aiming to reject terms and substitute them with more proper designations, the language of the scholarly community – let alone everyday language – ends up returning to these keywords time and time again, forced to accept their indispensable role for research and interpretation.

Paradigmatic examples of such controversial terms are the notions of “form” and “style”. Meaning both the perceivable phenomenon and the invisible structure, the image and the idea, “form” can be opposed both to content (subject) and to materiality. When opposed to content, form can absorb in itself material factors as well; when opposed to matter, it can be employed to identify the subject. As regards “style” (frequently associated with form), it can refer to a *principium individuationis*, that which makes every work by Picasso specifically “Picassian”. But it can also function as a *principium dividuationis*, enabling us to gather Picasso, Braque and other artists under one and the same general label, “cubism”. Moreover, style is deemed a positive character when a person or a work *has* style; a negative one, when something *is* in a style (implying it is just imitative). Notwithstanding all the ambiguities of these notions, and the repeated efforts to amend them or even get rid of them, they seem more alive and kicking than ever.

“Abstraction” does not lag behind in this respect. A major problem seems to concern the preposition “from” that we always – either implicitly or explicitly – pronounce when employing the term. When we abstract (in any thought process, both in intellectual activities and in everyday experience), we abstract-from a series of elements that nevertheless belong to the object we are considering: from its weight, its form, its material and its dimensions, if we are, for example, focusing on the colour of a certain

thing. But this way of conceiving abstraction ultimately makes it dependent on the total object of which we decide to investigate only one single aspect.

If we transpose this argument to the domain of visual arts, such a conception of abstraction would let in through the back door that which had apparently left through the front: the model or the external referent “from” which this or that particular property would be abstracted in order to obtain an abstract picture. But this is “stylization” much more than “abstraction”. This is why alternatives such as “non-objective (German *gegenstandslos*)”, non-representational and non-figurative, have been put forward to avoid this relapse into the paradigm of traditional figuration. And still, abstraction resists. Instead of fighting against this term, we had better be critically aware of its possible misunderstandings, and of its deep implications.

What should abstraction consist of, once it is emancipated from the preposition “from”? Not of the iconic restitution of an already given reality, but of letting something come into being that can exist for the first time and only in that image. In this perspective, creation, invention, and all the cognate terms that art theory and history have elaborated over the centuries in order to characterize artistic production take on a new sense.

At the same time, together with the preposition “from” associated with the expression “abstraction-from”, another preposition is radically questioned by this process. It is the preposition “of”, implicitly or explicitly pronounced when we speak of an image as of an iconic representation “of” something that exists before being represented by that image and continues to lead its autonomous existence. The German term for “model”, *Vorbild*, effectively illuminates the status of the model, which stands “before” (*vor*) the image (*Bild*) both in the spatial and in the temporal sense. Once we have understood it in its emancipation from the “from”, abstract art challenges a millennia-old tradition that might be called for the sake of brevity “Platonistic”: a tradition based on the idea that visual arts perform an iconic rendition of a model which is ontologically and gnoseologically superior to the rendition itself. A human being represented in a portrait or a piece of nature depicted in a landscape painting are entities independent from their being rendered by an image, which possesses less being and less truth than the model. The extent of being and truth of the image on the contrary depends on its being able to approach in a more or less faithful manner the external referent.

The claim of the ontological and gnoseological inferiority of the image with respect to the model constitutes the core of Plato’s doctrine of *mimesis* as exposed in Book 10 of *The Republic*. As is well known, its

author drew unfavourable consequences for artists: much like the sophists, they were to be banned from the ideal state for producing apparent realities and illusory knowledge. Such a ban inaugurated a powerful iconophobic, if not overtly iconoclastic, attitude that was destined to endure in the Western tradition down to our contemporary age. This attitude fed a pervasive suspicion towards images, which on account of their essentially illusory nature were considered incapable of delivering a clear and distinct knowledge of the real, and were thus opposed in this respect to the logical concept effectively expressed by language.

If we prefer to call this cultural tradition “Platonistic” rather than simply “Platonic”, it is because Plato’s meditations on the status of the image are much more complex and sophisticated than the vulgarization that over the centuries consolidated a simplistic conception of *mimesis* as a mere reproductive imitation of what is already given: just think of dialogues such as the *Meno* and the *Sophist*, which offer – if a pun is allowed here – a totally different picture of the image.

In spite of this complexity, it was nevertheless the “Platonistic” version of reproductive imitation that became the mainstream understanding of what visual arts aim to accomplish, and this could happen only by virtue of a fundamental inversion of the axiological condemnation expressed in *The Republic*: if the dialogue had judged such an imitation deceptive and delusive, it was only by reverting such a negative evaluation into a positive one that *mimesis* could become the fundamental task of the visual artist. This applies both to naturalism and idealism, to the extent that the representation of the ideal as an amelioration through art of what is given in nature is obtained by way of a combination of portions of natural components adequately imitated – as shown by the famous anecdote of Zeuxis and the five most beautiful virgins of Croton, each of whom lent the painter bits of beauty so that he could achieve the rendition of a perfect Helen.

The legend is recounted, among other sources, by Cicero and Pliny the Elder. The latter also offers a version of a contest between two famous painters, Apelles and Protogenes, who competed on the same canvas to demonstrate their ability to draw the thinnest line. At the end, Protogenes admitted defeat, and displayed the work that had been the battlefield of their talents to the admiration both of laymen and artists: its large surface contained “nothing but almost invisible lines, so that alongside the outstanding works of many artists it looked like a blank space, and by that very fact attracted attention and was more esteemed than any masterpiece” (*Natural History* 35: 83).

Hence, during more or less the same period as when Plato was laying down the foundations of the mimetic theory, a painting was admired as the supreme masterpiece for being nothing but blank space and almost invisible lines – in other words, for representing nothing. One could have called this painting *gegenstandslos* many centuries before Kandinsky's first abstract watercolour, painted in 1910 and conventionally considered the starting point of modern abstract art. Once we begin to look for starting points, the genealogical gaze immediately attracts us towards the abysses of an almost immemorial past, that of legendary anecdotes and of myth. Such a perspective reminds us that the non-representational drive has always been there, beside (behind? below? beyond?) the representational urge, before manifesting itself openly in the outburst of the 20th century.

The present volume offers a rich panorama of this outburst, focusing on a specific kind of visual art – sculpture – which on account of its three-dimensional and volumetric nature is constitutively “objectual”, “thingish”. It is in this respect much more difficult for a sculpture to undergo a process of abstraction than a two-dimensional picture, and therefore even more challenging.

This volume, however, does not consist of a collection of interpretative essays devoted to the artistic production of some of the most prominent modern and contemporary sculptors, here listed in chronological order: Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988); David Smith (1906–1965); Tony Smith (1912–1980); Yves Klein (1928–1962); Donald Judd (1928–1994); Robert Morris (1931–); Francesco Lo Savio (1935–1963); Carl Andre (1935–); Luciano Fabro (1936–2007); Gianni Colombo (1937–1993); Robert Smithson (1938–1973); Richard Serra (1939–); Joseph Kosuth (1945–); Matthew Barney (1967–).

Its particular and distinctive feature is to lend an attentive ear to the words uttered by the sculptors themselves. The authors we have chosen to be the subjects of the book are not only eminent artists who made their mark in the contemporary sculptural landscape: they are also sharp and insightful theorists, inclined to reflect intensely upon the sense of their own work in particular and upon the nature of abstract sculpture in general.

Nevertheless, the ever more reflexive inclination of artistic expression (already observed as an ongoing and increasing phenomenon by Hegel in the first half of the 19th century) should not mislead the reader about the structural relationship instituted between artworks on one side and theoretical statements on the other. This relationship should by no means be understood as if an artist's pronouncements contained the ultimate key to the comprehension of their art. Such a misunderstanding would lead us

to an erroneous reading of these texts for two main reasons: firstly, it would fail to acknowledge a golden principle of hermeneutics, in force at least since the 18th century, namely that the authors are not the best interpreters of their own work (also because they themselves are not always aware of what they put into the work). Secondly, it would adopt a substantially logocentric approach, in assuming that only conceptual assertions assigned to verbal language can offer a clear and distinct knowledge of what is rendered in an opaque and obscure manner through sculptural activity. Essays, articles, interviews, and all kinds of non-iconic sources should on the contrary be assessed and interpreted as expressive works beside the sculptural artworks, and correlated to them in an interconnection of mutual illumination.

The three sections that make up the volume explore three of the main directions taken by abstract sculpture in the course of the 20th century: *Sensation* (Isamu Noguchi, Yves Klein, Gianni Colombo, Richard Serra, Matthew Barney); *Idea* (David Smith, Tony Smith, Donald Judd, Robert Morris); and *Language* (Francesco Lo Savio, Carl Andre, Luciano Fabro, Robert Smithson, Joseph Kosuth). Before inviting the reader to refer to the specific introductions to the three parts (written by my co-editors, respectively Michele Bertolini, Stefano Esengrini, and Cristina Baldacci, whom I warmly and gratefully thank here, together with all the contributors, for their intellectually stimulating cooperation in this project), I would like to say a few final words on how such notions relate to the overall concept of *abstraction* as illustrated above, namely in its emancipation from the “from”.

Although each of these notions operates in its own different way (and differently for each artist collected under the corresponding category), their “abstract” nature entails a renegotiation of the relationship between the author, the beholder, the sculptural object and the space hosting it. The object is no longer conceived of as a material support for the representation of a sculptural subject to be contemplated by a spectator, but is rather understood as a trigger capable of sparking an experience (and *experiencer* would actually be a much better name than beholder or spectator for its public).

This aspect is intuitively evident in the section *Sensation*, a part that thematizes the transformation of the sculptural object into a chronotopic and aisthetic experience, in which synesthetic perceptions and motor responses come to augment and radically metamorphose the traditional optical contemplation of a statue. But it is also addressed by the Section *Idea*, which elaborates the hypothesis that sculpture has to do with form: not in the sense of a given external shape that should be iconically

replicated and aesthetically contemplated, but rather in the sense of an *eidos* or *morphe*, of structural properties that the sculptural act can bring to disclosure and identify as the truth-content of a knowledge process. Cognitive apprehension has traditionally been considered a task of conceptualization, ideally expressed in a transparent linguistic form: the last section, *Language*, reveals on the contrary the concrete materiality of language, its opaqueness, while at the same time hinting at the common figural origin of both language and image, two expressive domains too often and too simplistically opposed in their differences.

Sensation, Idea, Language: three ways to understand why abstraction has mattered, and still does.

PART I.

SENSATION

INTRODUCTION

MICHELE BERTOLINI

With its Greek etymological origin as *aisthesis*, the word “sensation” is key to the understanding both of philosophical theories dealing with the conditions of possibility of our sensory opening to the world and of aesthetics understood as theory of beauty and art. Enquiries on sensation then engage in both the theory of perception and the branch of aesthetics discussing the arts, inasmuch as the latter’s reception primarily involves all sense channels of the audience. In the second half of the 20th century, sculpture in particular thoroughly investigated and newly rediscovered the relationship established by the work of art with the living body and the whole of the user’s perceptual experience. In this respect, an often critical position is developed concerning the predominance of the eye and the centrality of vision, as inherited by the Western aesthetics and artistic tradition. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that – thanks to its constitutive relation to real occupied space and the direct connection with touch – it is precisely sculpture, more than painting, that articulates and redefines the sensory and kinaesthetic complexity of the bystander’s experience. As a result, contemporary sculpture is able to retrieve the value of bodily sense conditions by means of the critique of “the logic of the monument” (Krauss 1977) – as shared by authors such as Klein, Serra and Colombo, – challenging the reduction of the user’s position to the static contemplation from a distance of the sculptural object.

Theoretical texts such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* and James J. Gibson’s *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1945; Gibson 1979) contribute decisively to open up new strategies acknowledging the complexity of human perception in terms of being embodied and always situated in a lived space, that is to say in a surrounding environment in which man’s moving body is originally located. These works in philosophy and psychology explicitly influence and solicit the ideas/inquiries/endeavours of artists and sculptors, as is the case for Richard Serra in the United States concerning Merleau-Ponty (see Pinotti), and for Gianni Colombo in Italy concerning Gibson (see Detheridge).

The theory and practices of contemporary sculpture articulate the key role of sensation in the exchange between the viewer and the work of art according to a twofold direction. For one thing, interest shifts from the form (*Gestalt*) of the artistic object towards the web of sensory and psychological effects solicited or activated by the work of art in the user. For another, the role and position of the very subject of fruition is transformed from being a “contemplative visual observer” to becoming an active and dynamic “experiencer”, “beholder”, who goes through, inhabits, explores and traverses the art installation with the whole of his or her living body and senses – not only by means of sight, but also with touch, hearing, and the synaesthetic and kinaesthetic experience of the moving body. Hence the priority given to the spatial and environmental features of the artistic experience, which place sculpture in an “expanded field” (Krauss 1979), where the loss of physicality, materialness, heaviness, solidity, proper to traditional sculpture, is counterbalanced by the activation of environmental spaces, which are able to even more powerfully and effectively act on the body of the bystander, both directly – as testified by Gianni Colombo’s elastic, haptic and diagonometric space – and by means of the immaterial, yet perceptible, solicitation of an “expanded tactility”, as proven by Yves Klein’s *Exposition du Vide*, otherwise defined as extended and spatial sculpture (see Detheridge, Fimiani). The core position of the user’s living body and of its diverse and multiple sensory functions is therefore emphasized by the research work of those who, like Richard Serra, stress the material physicality of their site-specific œuvres (see Pinotti), as well as by those who, like Yves Klein, lean instead towards the vaporization and airy dematerialization of sculpture (see Fimiani). Moreover, the dismissal of medium specificity, which would assign to traditionally intended sculpture a series of recognizable features – i.e. a modelled solid form on a pedestal – allows artists such as Matthey Barney to define the five films of his *Cremaster Cycle* as “a sculptural project”, where it is the biological and metamorphic body of the artist – filmed by the camera, drawn, or performatively acted – which becomes an “operator” capable of producing signs and sculptural forms. These latter are contingent and provisional and meant to express the dialectics of figuration and abstraction, between energy and resistance, order and entropy (see Mengoni).

The re-definition of space through sculptural practice is then the leitmotiv running through the enquiries and endeavours of the artists gathered in this section. Space, here, is neither objective nor geometrical. It is notably not reducible to architectonic and museum-related space, this latter often being rejected and loathed by the authors. As richly reported

by his autobiography, *A Sculptor's World*, for Isamu Noguchi's research (see Ricci), for instance, the path to abstraction in sculpture is rooted in the living experience of the unity of nature, that is to say the unity between man, things and space. The choice of abstraction in this case is not motivated by the tension towards pure, abstract, cold, geometrical shapes, as it is instead the case for some avant-garde experiences of the 20th century. Here, abstraction is the right method to relate to nature, reality and human feelings. According to Noguchi, once figurative references are overcome, the relationship to nature goes through the knowledge and use of materials, of the traces left by human touch on matter; in other words, the articulation of a space where new sense-based modes of opening to reality are activated and stimulated.

What is at stake in abstract sculptural research is therefore the activation of a sensory space which, even though immaterial, is nonetheless lived, dense in qualities, and inseparable from the embodied and moving body of the user. Such a body perceives space and objects in a sequence of time-based aspects grasped by its own movement and thus introduces inescapable temporal features in the experience of sculpture. Sculpture is finally transformed into a "chronotopic operation."

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CHAPTER ONE

ABSTRACTION IN NOGUCHI'S OWN WORDS: IN SEARCH OF PERMANENCE

CLARISSA RICCI

This essay endeavours to explore how Isamu Noguchi interpreted the concept of abstraction and how he defined it in one of the most poignant documents that remain on the artist's thinking: his autobiography, *A Sculptor's World*.

Noguchi penned his life text in the latter stages of his artistic maturity when he had earned a certain recognition from the art world.¹ Noguchi's tome enables art historians to retrace the trajectory of the artist's life through the first-hand narration of the most salient moments of his artistic pursuit and research. In fact, the word "research" is a term that recurs so frequently that it is undeniably the *fil rouge* into this enquiry. The artist identified himself as an explorer of matter who, through the investigation of various techniques and numerous forms, from antiquity to modernity, attempted to perceive the meaning of sculpture.

Numerous documents in the form of interviews, articles and statements provide a further corpus of Noguchi's literary work and offer invaluable insights into the artist's thoughts.

1. In search of abstraction

Despite the fact that art critic Dore Ashton alludes to Noguchi's tendency to storytell and mythmake (Ashton 1992, 5–9), the autobiography's initial pages offer the first of the artist's interpretations on abstraction.

¹ Even though his influence was somewhat peripheral compared to his contemporaries of the New York School. Noguchi displayed contradictory behaviour towards the art world, he both liked to stay at the margins and lamented his marginality.

Noguchi only lived in Japan until he was thirteen years of age. However, the first pages of his account are exclusively identified with the country which, on the one hand, represented for him a lost paradise where he experienced his initial encounters with sculpture:

My first recollection of joy was going to a newly opened experimental kindergarten [...] where children were taught to do things with their hands. My first sculpture was made there in the form of a sea wave, in clay with a blue glaze"; "I learned the basic uses of wood tools. (Noguchi 1968, 11)

On the other hand, Japan instilled in him an intimate bond with nature ("a typical Japanese boy, knowledgeable in the ways of nature" [Noguchi 1968, 11]) due also to what he learned from his mother ("She taught me botany" [Noguchi 1968, 12]). He therefore related his origins as a sculptor to the Orient in order to demonstrate the inextricable bond he felt to this certain figurative world and to an inherent awareness of nature (Apostolos-Cappadona, and Altshuler eds. 1994, 130–5).

Noguchi's initial years of training in New York at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School are barely acknowledged in his autobiography but for a few paragraphs. It is here in New York where he learned to sculpt well and was first noticed for his abilities. Yet Noguchi's recollections in hindsight are incongruous: "Alas, all of this was false feeding: everything I learned I had later to unlearn" (Noguchi 1968, 15–16). Instead it is his encounter with the modern art of the first abstract avant-gardes – and most significantly with the works of Constantin Brancusi – which set Noguchi on his path towards the true possibility of "personal expression."

The first excerpt of *A Sculptor's World* in which Noguchi refers to "abstraction" is his submission to obtain a three-year fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation in 1926. In this document, abstraction was for the young Noguchi something to achieve and investigate; an artistic dimension where he envisaged the unity between man and nature. We can understand from Noguchi's words that abstraction signified the possibility for an artist to access reality by "the study of inner surfaces and the life elements" (Noguchi 1968, 16). Abstract art is meant to represent an important evolution: a fundamental transition from the interest in the human figure (as an object of special veneration) towards nature, which he considered not only the expression of the vegetal and animal world but a receptacle for universal existence. In the world of abstract sculptural expression every element is a fine balance of spirit with matter where "flowers, trees [...] as well as birds, beasts and man, would be given their due place" (Noguchi 1968, 16).

For Noguchi, the ultimate artistic path was one immersed in nature; one that leads to “an unlimited field for abstract sculptural expression” and one in which the veneration of nature, not man, is paramount: “There must be unthought of heights of beauty to which sculpture may be raised by this reversal of attitude” (Noguchi 1968, 16).

Noguchi's words, inspired by Brancusi (“I was transfixed by his vision” [Noguchi 1968, 16]), are enlightened, almost religiously connotative. Furthermore, in saying “some sculptors today appreciate the importance of matter, but are too much engrossed with symbolism. Others [...] Interested only in the interpretation of strictly human forms” (Noguchi 1968, 16), the artist singles out the form of abstraction that did not interest him even if, at times, his excellent ability in portraiture would constitute his livelihood (Grove 1989).

The final part of the Guggenheim's submission indicates also his destinations. The first is Paris, which Noguchi considered the place where one should be educated in modern art. Paris was an indispensable rite of passage for study and exchange for any aspiring modern artist of that period and Noguchi had a specific interest in learning in Brancusi's studio (Duus 2006).

The second place indicated by Noguchi to visit was the Orient (more specifically India, China and Japan) which he considered mandatory to fulfil his heritage. This is an intriguing part of the document because he doesn't refer only to his bequeathed Japan as his cultural legacy, but to a broader concept of Orient; this sentiment is reconfirmed after a few sentences when he declares his desire to become, as his father was for poetry, an “interpreter for the West of the East.” Moreover, he emphasizes his volition to fulfil his heritage with a question mark and a directly interrogative sentence added to the original document. In doing so, Noguchi wanted to show the reader that his native belonging was to the Orient while the origin and the identity he was longing for went well beyond his biographical data. His initial interest in visiting Japan may have been motivated by his desire to encounter his father, whom he had previously met only through his poems, but his return ignited a vital search for pristine forms as well as a true and original relationship to matter.

Subsequently, he spent all of his life searching for the Orient, although his approach was that of a western man. He was fundamentally a modernist (Altshuler 1994, 99–101; Linford 2013) involved with social issues, a man with a utopian vision and a predilection for discourse on matter. He explored not only the Orient but what was associated with the Orient such as the primitive and the archaic:

The older it is, the more archaic and primitive, the better I like it. [...] repeated distillation of art brings you back to the primordial [...] earliest people tried to indicate their sense of significance, and even further back until you get to the fundamental material itself. (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 135)

As stated in a memoir, such cogitation and respect for origin was reminiscent of Brancusi's school of thought: "The notion came to him that his art, sculpture, could not go forward to be born without first going back to beginnings" (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 114).

During his oriental travels, Noguchi recorded his interest in the way the Chinese applied "the art of the brush, to learn how to be with nature" (Noguchi 1968, 20). In Japan he studied the copies of Tang and Haniwa figurines which he considered "simpler, more primitive [...] in a sense modern" (Noguchi 1968, 20), while also showing interest in European prehistoric caves, menhirs and dolmens, ancient Greek art, the Khmer architecture of Angkor Wat, the Javanese Buddhist architecture of Borobudur and the Indian rock-cut architecture of Ellora. His interest lay in enduring forms that had a social significance, the archaism of roughly carved stones, figures and silhouettes. He searched the Orient for a past, a heritage of humanity, which he presented in an article explaining the bond between modern art and primitivism: "Here without any fuss is an immediate confrontation of the spirit. We are delighted to find and surprised at finding what we had forgotten we were looking for" (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 43).

The essence of Noguchi's identity as part Japanese part American is pivotal for many historians and both paradigms are emphasized at the beginning and end of his autobiography. At the outset, his career was marked by the inextricable influences of both the East and the West, coexisting to the point that for Noguchi the modern way and the Orient were one single entity. Both these influences would characterize his artistic production. However, only towards the end of his career, was Noguchi also able to ride on the edge of East and West. He toiled over his "Japan", that intimate link between man/matter/nature, after searching for it through numerous stage sets for Martha Graham, gardens, art works for American corporations, public monuments, and rough materials which allowed the artist to reflect upon the value and meaning of sculpture in space.

His autobiography and, to a greater extent, the *Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum* catalogue,² were dedicated to demonstrating Noguchi's undeniable Oriental attitude despite him rhetorically asking himself: "Why do I continuously go back to Japan, except to renew my constant with the earth?" (Noguchi 1968, 20). He found the answer to this question in searching the "inner reality [...] of which sculpture is a reflection and sign" (Noguchi 1968, 20).

In his Guggenheim application, Noguchi pointed out the method of this research, which he was certain would lead him to "unthought heights of beauty": nature.

But what does the word "nature" mean, exactly? (Inpik 2012). We can recognize three different interconnected ways of understanding it. At the time of his journey to Paris (1926–27) his idea of nature was definitely close to that of the first abstractists. However, forty years later, when writing his autobiography, by not transcribing the opening sentence of the application in which he stressed the opposition between man and nature,³ Noguchi tried to deny this period of his life. Instead, he opted to preserve the part in which he rejects a sculpture interpreted "as medium for the idealization and glorification of man", favouring "nature" as it "offers many another subject." In the wake of Brancusi, the young Noguchi saw abstract art as an essential and spiritual bond with nature as well as an originary source of meaning. Abandoning the human figure signified, effectively, abandoning the old way of sculpting "à la Rodin."⁴

A second way in which Noguchi conceived nature was through the coincidence between nature and matter; an exploration of nature coincided with the investigation of material, its limitations and possibilities, to the point where all errors or faults, even cracks, become part of sculpture. Brancusi was "an apostle of the new view of the sculptor's material" (Cort and Winther-Tamaki 2003), teaching the young Noguchi how to deal with the limitations of materials and how to manoeuvre tools. The radicalism

² "This museum and catalogue attempt to define my role as a crossing where inward and outward meet, East and West. There already is a continuity by others and is my hope that this museum may expand to become a center for presenting related concepts and helping in their realization." (Noguchi 1987, 12)

³ "It has long been my conviction that sculpture has been overly employed as a medium for the idealization and glorification of man and, while it may be granted that the interpretation of the human figure will always remain its chief objective, I am nevertheless of the opinion that nature offers many another subject which would lend itself to some strange and exquisite sculptural treatment." (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 16)

⁴ This is a feeling that was common to many artists at the time, but also of Brancusi. See Golding 1994, 187.

Noguchi dedicated to this approach was, however, influenced by the American “honesty to matter” preached in the 1930s, with Bill Zorach’s perspective often cited by the artists as an example (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 145). In his autobiography, Noguchi expresses his bond with material as a key aspect, to the extent that the account of his life in the autobiography goes from the understanding of one material to another together with the new achievements he acquired through each medium. All of his rhetoric is built around the idea of the artist as an explorer of matter. His interest lies in any medium because, thanks to his honesty towards material, the scope of investigation is limitless, allowing the artist to access the realm of true artistic creation: “Everything was sculpture. Any material, any idea, without hindrance born into space. I considered sculpture. I worked with driftwood, bones, paper, strings, cloth, shell, wire, wood, and plastics; and magnetite” (Noguchi 1968, 26).

The third way he considered nature was as a quasi-spiritual dimension, a world made of natural and artificial elements comprising an infinite space inhabited by man, something Dominika Glogowski calls “embodied nature” (Glogowski 2012, 169–83). This third consideration was already represented in the paper Noguchi wrote for the Guggenheim Foundation but it clearly developed over time and will be further discussed in the last paragraph of this text.

2. Abstraction vocabulary

With the elision of the beginning of his paper for the Guggenheim Foundation what exactly did Noguchi want to distance himself from?

The person who introduced the artist to abstraction and who, in his eyes, represented the artistic essence of “pure abstraction”, was Brancusi. Hence, it is in relation to his persona that we can understand what interested, attracted him or what he repudiated about abstraction. In the autobiography Noguchi recounts his apprenticeship at Brancusi’s studio, where the master introduced him to the correct use of tools, deep concentration and the search for the distillation and essence of a form. When he had finished his working day the young Noguchi would then practice other abstract forms more aligned to those of Picasso or the Constructivists. He also revealed his difficulty and incapacity to embrace the “abstract verb” and in secret, with a sense of guilt, he sculpted figures and small bronzes. Brancusi used to repeat to Noguchi how lucky he was to be a new-generation artist as he could go directly to abstraction without abstracting from nature, as Brancusi had had to do. Noguchi remembered this reflection several times and in the autobiography he wrote: “Pure

abstractions, or at least those geometrically derived, left me cold, and I was always being torn between Brancusi's admonition and my desire to make something more meaningful to myself" (Noguchi 1968, 18).

Many years later, in 1979, in an interview with Paul Cunningham, Noguchi commented on Brancusi's reflection revealing that to Americans it seemed absurd to think of art "in a puritanical way." For him and his peers, sculptural art had to be "meaningful without being realistic, at once abstract and socially relevant" (Noguchi 1968, 21), it "had to be an important part of the living experience" (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 138), showing how in the 1930s American art was a political issue, which called for direct workers and labour (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 141). At the same time, he identified with the generation that did not need to abstract from nature in direct lineage with the purism of abstraction. Furthermore, in another text, he underlines that "abstraction is beside the point." For Noguchi abstraction could only take place when everything had its due place and when the artist was able to see the unity of nature, or the unity between man, things and the space. The abstraction he was interested in was not pure geometry, but one with a certain morphologic quality, capable of showing a connection with life and signs of the "human touch." Therefore, the research can be described as teleological, where the goals are unity and a synthesis of universal elements. In a passage he asks himself: "Was pure abstraction really an advance? There is no advance but rather a recognition of something that continues and permeates time" in which "all manifestations are extensions of geometry, more or less complex."

Noguchi's arrival in Paris coincided with the end of a ten-year period diffusing many different forms of abstraction: Cubism, the geometrism of Mondrian, the essential forms of Brancusi, the tension of Constructivists. Noguchi learned all of them, although, as the artist himself specifies, his fascination was not philological, but his interest encompassed all "manifestations", allowing his expression of abstraction to be populated by numerous forms that could be investigated collectively. In his artistic production he passed from morphologic quasi-human forms to cubes, pyramids and spheres. Abstraction was his vocabulary and he saw it as the language of modern art.⁵

Once back from Paris he spoke of not doing an abstract sculpture for a long time and he explained it by saying that it depended on:

⁵ This interpretation is not peculiar to Noguchi; it transpires ideas of his time. Meyer Shapiro, for example examining Barr's interpretation of Abstract art specifies that "nature and abstract forms are both materials for art, and the choice of one or the other flows from historically changing interests" (Shapiro 1937, 42).

...a recognition of inadequacy on my part. I was poor and could not afford it. On the other hand, [...] I felt too young and inexperienced for abstractions: I had to live first. (Noguchi 1968, 36)

In this moment of his life, abstraction represented something to achieve and a way to connect with meaning, while in the writing of his autobiography his feelings were ambivalent. Noguchi recognized Brancusi's approach in terms of unity with nature, his consideration of space, and in the importance of "being a child." At the same time, in 1968, Brancusi held a specific position in time and in the history of art that, in Noguchi's opinion, did not coincide with modernity. Narrating an exhibition he had held in 1959 at the Stable Gallery, paying homage to Brancusi, Noguchi later commented: "I was conscious at the time of having been denied modernity" (Noguchi 1968, 36). This episode is equitable with his decision to put all of his pieces most influenced by Brancusi in Area 12 in his Museum at Long Island where, curiously, the works he exposed at Moma in *Fourteen Americans*⁶ were also displayed.

What Noguchi really treasured was not, as Brancusi thought, the use of pure forms, but a method of distillation:

What Brancusi does with a bird or the Japanese do with a garden is to take the essence of nature and distil it – just as a poet does. That's what I'm interested in – the poetic translation [...] the fundamental question of art which is for me the meaning of a thing, the evocative essence which moves us. (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 131–2)

When Noguchi refers to the process of sculpting he is not talking about the rough-cut of the essential, but of its concentration and distillation.⁷ The artist felt he was part of the new course of modern art – as he explained in the pages of *Art News* in 1949 – where all of the sculptors of the last century had been influenced by Rodin and could be divided into two branches: one more linked to mechanical aspects, interested in forms per

⁶ In Area 12 we find works such as *Leda* (1928 and 1944), *Death (Lynched Figure)* (1934) but also *Lunar Infant* (1944) and *Monument to Heroes* (1943) shown in 1946 at MoMA, in the exhibition which gave him his first great recognition after the monument he designed for the Associated Press Building in 1938–1940. See Noguchi 1987, 230–58.

⁷ "To distill" is a frequently used verb by Noguchi in many instances including the costumes designed for *King Lear*: "distilled and fully attuned to the deeper meaning of *Lear*" (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 79). "It's a privilege of the artist to make his own translation, his own distillation of what moves him" (Kuh 1962, 133).

se, such as the Russian Constructivists; and the other a “more organic type” interested in “the transmutation of nature into the abstract [...] based on the analytical simplification of natural images.” Old faces of the sculpting world – such as Picasso, Brancusi, Duchamp-Villon, Giacometti and Lipchitz – were now greeted by new faces, readying for “far greater challenges ahead” (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 32–3).

More involved with questioning the living spaces of existence, Noguchi belonged to a generation which was not preoccupied with abstracting forms from nature nor was he interested in abstraction as an issue; instead, as Noguchi said, “we are now more concerned with the relationship of things than with the things themselves”; “our reality is the space between” (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 33). Hence, for a shape such as a triangle, the artist was not interested in the “form-triangle”, as the use of geometrical forms is always connected to the person who “charges them with vital associations”, but in the way it interacted in relation to us and with the space within. Noguchi was not interested in “new” forms, but in the “right” form. For instance, still utilizing the example of the triangle, we are able to list the different ways in which Noguchi chooses to employ the triangle: as a pyramid symbol of Pan-Americanism in *Monument to the Plow* project (1933–36), as a base for the tetrahedron which forms the *Intetra* fountain (1976), or as an element indicating a time on earth, in the past or another point in infinity in the *Sunken Garden* (1960–64) for Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale.⁸

The ease with which Noguchi adopted forms is deep-rooted in his idea that they pre-exist in nature, and the artist is the vehicle to bring forms into contact with man: “What is the artist but the channel through which spirits descend?” (Noguchi 1968, 40). Thus he was not dealing with forms conquered by a process of abstraction but more with a “recognition of something that permeates time” (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 115). Noguchi's abstraction was not searching for an infinity above but, more specifically, for a recognition of existential permanence. It is no accident when he states:

We change in the historical sense, but though our interpretation changes, the universal truth remains. Sculpture and the other arts must forever change, the better to reflect the same changeless reality. (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 34)

⁸ For *Monument to the Plow* see Linford 2013, 26–38; for *Intetra Fountain* see Glogowski 2012; for the *Marble Garden* see Noguchi 1968, 170.

3. In the search of permanence: “If I succeed, I have transcended not just our time, but all time.”⁹

To further the understanding that abstraction was attractive for Noguchi not because it indicated the “pure form” but because it indicated the correct method to relate to nature, reality and human feelings, we need to take into consideration the notion of “space” which characterizes Noguchi to the point that he is remembered as the “sculptor of space.” Even if for artists of post-World War II it was a familiar issue, “space” is a concept that belongs to the third way in which Noguchi viewed nature and its deep interconnectivity with sculpting.

At the end of his autobiography Noguchi depicted a type of sculpture that was able to connect one with the meaning of the world and of nature, setting a parallelism between world/sculpture and Japanese Gardens as symbols of the Universe:

In Japan the rocks in a garden are so planted as to suggest a protuberance from the primordial mass below. [...] rocks are joined way below. We are made aware of this ‘floating world’ through consciousness of sheer invisible mass [...] the heavenly bodies floating in the firmament are all connected, by gravitational [...] Earthbound though we are, we are free to move about its surface, like filings on a magnet. (Noguchi 1968, 40)

The description Richard Buckminster Fuller gives of the structure of the Universe in *Synergetics* helps us understand this vision better: “Nature does not operate in parallel. She operates in radiational divergence and gravitational convergence.” In such a synergetic system men are embedded: “Humans have been included in this cosmic design as local Universe information-gatherers and social problem-solvers in support to the integrity of the eternal [...] In support of their cosmic functioning humans were given their minds with which to discover and employ generalized laws governing all physical and metaphysical, omniinteraccommodative, ceaseless intertransformings of Universe.” Analogies between these quotes¹⁰

⁹ Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 145.

¹⁰ Deeper investigation between Noguchi and Buckminster Fuller should be done even though many critics point out how this friendship was intellectually inspiring for both of them. The analogies I report here are only examples among many. See also how Noguchi regarded the importance of Buckminster Fuller’s thinking. “I should say that after returning to New York I was in a sense in revolt against his too-idealizing influence. Bucky was for me the truth of structure which circumvented questions of art. He taught me, but left me free to seek my own way” (Apostolos-Cappadona, and Altshuler eds. 1994, 117). See also Shoji 2011.

are evident and further reveal that Fuller perceived the “metaphysical” as part of the Universe to the point of stating: “Space is the inescapable awareness of unaccounted otherness” (Buckminster Fuller 2015).

For Noguchi, the artist's effort becomes an attempt to account for the otherness: “The promise of sculpture is to project these inner presences into forms that can be recognized as important and meaningful in themselves.” The visible world “is more than scientific truths. It enters our consciousness as emotion as well as knowledge.”

The concepts' interconnection clearly shows that the purpose of sculpture arises as a vocation, a calling which the artist must respond to offering a horizon of expression unaffected by specific provenance or language but by the world. In *A Sculptor's World*, Noguchi describes the trajectory of his formation as designed and rooted in the Orient, subsequently growing outwards and addressing the world: “Our heritage is now the world” (Noguchi 1968, 40). It is, in fact, by saying “after each bout with the world I find myself returning chastened and contented enough to seek, within the limits of a single sculpture, the world” (Noguchi 1968, 40) that he simply yet poignantly ends his autobiography.

Moreover, the world Noguchi searched for was connected with the perception of space in a way that made him speak of space, defined as “continuum or our existence”, as the essence of sculpture,¹¹ showing how the permanent quality the artist is looking for in the world concerns immanence. This view is in stark contrast with Brancusi who perceived spirituality as something he saw far from himself, detached, to be reached for.¹² On the contrary, in Noguchi's concept of space, the human – both as sculptor and as spectator – stays central, activating both sculpture and space with his movements as a walking man to the point that: “The sculpting of space – sculpture which defines space – may even be invisible as sculpture and still exists as sculptural space” (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 52).

According to John Golding, for many other abstract artists this search for permanence concerns a personal artistic “path to the absolute” in which a spiritual pursuit is embedded in artistic research (Golding 2002). Noguchi's peculiar experimentation sees an important coincidence between the idea of space and the world so that the search for permanence and meaning coincide with the aim of sculpture. The importance of this

¹¹ “The essence of sculpture is for me the perception of space, the continuum of our existence. All dimensions are but measures of it [...] I say it is the sculpture who orders and animates pace, gives it meaning.” (Noguchi 1968, 28)

¹² “I'm no longer of this world. I am far from myself detached from my body. I am among essential things.” (Geist 1983)

theme was very much embedded both in Noguchi's practice and in his literary production, making it possible to find definitions of its scope in many texts over the course of his life:

For the artist there is the special duty of transmitting to posterity the tradition of art – to seek profoundly the imagination the truth and send its light into the darkness of men's heart; (sculpture) it seeks to give an order and significance to living. Against the rising chaos [...] a fence against the dark. (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 36, 39)

The centrality of this thinking can also be traced in the title and structure Noguchi gave his exhibition at the 1986 Venice Biennale, *What is Sculpture?*

Although, when writing his autobiography, it is probably while reflecting on the future mission of art in an electronic age that he best synthesizes the coincidence between permanence and the scope of sculpture, between art and spirituality: "Where all we see is change I like to think that sculpture may have in this a special role – as an antidote to impermanence."¹³ Hence, as Roger Lipsey notes (Lipsey 2011, 299–302, 335–54), what remains of religion, in Noguchi as in many of his contemporaries, is a spiritual attitude with no orthodox religion in the background. Noguchi was totally fed by and aware of secularization, declaring more than once that art can substitute religion, which dies as a dogma. What endures is the "invocation to God" in the form of a "non-anthropomorphic deity" or the "spirit of longing" (Apostolos-Cappadona and Altshuler eds. 1994, 33–4).

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¹³ Full quote: "Where all we see is change I like to think that sculpture may have in this a special role – as an antidote to impermanence – with newness yes, but with a quality of enduring freshness relative to that resonant void, without, not to end only as another phenomenon of our times. But this of course, is what art is" (Noguchi 1968, 40).