

## **A Primal Spirit**

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It is impossible to characterize contemporary Japanese art—the range of activities is simply too diverse, the pace of developments too rapid. Indeed, it is tempting to describe its eclectic nature as a defining characteristic in itself. Cosmopolitan and restless, the Japanese art community is emerging as a vital arena in the international art world and has begun to attract considerable attention in the West, whose art has often figured as a strong stimulant for recent Japanese art. Western-influenced art is in fact commonplace in Japan today, as is the artists' and critics' fascination with a culture in transition, a fascination that frequently finds creative expression in artworks demonstrating provocative, sometimes outlandish juxtapositions of Western style and Japanese subject, or vice versa. Only the smallest sampling of Japanese art of the mid- to late 1980s has been shown in the West, most of it reflecting a deliberate internationalism, however tentative or unresolved, and it may well be that the accessibility of such Japanese art and its apparent relationship to recent Western art has in part motivated its presentation to Western audiences.

There are, however, other significant and compelling directions in contemporary Japanese art that are all but unknown outside Japan, and, given the role that Western influence plays in the Japanese art world, some of these indigenous directions are not much more astutely observed within Japan. By exercising some resourcefulness, however—hunting down obscure group exhibition catalogues, investigating the activities of regional art museums and lesser-known galleries, combing through Japanese art magazines, and soliciting, almost indiscriminately, artists of every ilk for their slides—it is possible to discern many areas of pronounced artistic interest and creativity that do not dance the cakewalk of Western influence.



*A Primal Spirit* identifies a thrust in Japanese art that is unique in contemporary art internationally. The ten sculptors represented in this exhibition, though working independently and without a special goal to establish a patently "Japanese" style, nonetheless share a clearly identifiable and uniquely Japanese sensibility. Their work, while assertively innovative in form and style, sinks its roots deep into ancient Japanese traditions and cultural attitudes.

Generally, their art is a direct engagement of forces in nature and natural materials. The works, often large-scale, labor-intensive constructions, demonstrate radical transformations of natural materials and distortions of natural forms, complex arrangements of parts in space and time, and the embodiment of forces or processes of both creation and destruction. Within this broad range of expression, however, their individual responses to nature are anything but uniform: Chuichi Fujii bends huge tree trunks into dramatic contortions; Takamasa Kuniyasu arranges thousands of small ceramic blocks into vast, complex formations; and Toshikatsu Endo builds elemental geometric structures from wood or rocks and sets them on fire so that they are charred and severely distressed. But these and the other artists included in *A Primal Spirit*, as well as many other Japanese artists who could not be included, deliberately engage the essence of their materials to manifest and reveal man's relationship to nature.

Their art draws upon ideas and aesthetics that are not only traditional but dominant in Japanese art, including Shinto attitudes—that man is equivalent to and involved with nature and the spirits and life force embodied therein, that the art object is the locus of the individual's spiritual encounter with nature, that the artist works "with" the materials to discover their "inner being," rather than against them to impose his technical virtuosity—and Buddhist concepts—that man is not at the center of the universe, that the art object represents a microcosm of that universe, and that the function of art is fundamentally meditative. Though the work in *A Primal Spirit* is altogether secular, its deep spiritual content is reflected in dark and terrible forms built from the elemental things in nature—trees, rocks, minerals—that reveal primal forces of growth and change, creation and destruction, life and death.

Significantly, none of the artists in this exhibition claims to be a "Japanese" artist, and all of them are wary of any attribution of nationalism to their creative intent. Indeed, there is nothing in their art that suggests either political or aesthetic nationalism; further, their works are entirely contemporary and resemble little else in the history of Japanese art. Yet these artists affirm that their art is created within, and not apart from, an ongoing Japanese artistic tradition.



That these ten individuals do not have associations as a group—in fact, some of them had never met nor heard of some of the others—testifies to the presence of a shared sensibility; that their work is so distinct from any discernible tendency in Western contemporary art suggests that their art emanates from a shared sense of Japanese culture inflected by contemporary experience. Viewed collectively, the ten artists in *A Primal Spirit* represent one of the clearest, most stirring directions in Japanese art today.

In order to comprehend the significance of this art and to speculate on what the example of these artists may portend for their colleagues, both Japanese and Western, it is useful to examine some of the traditional concepts, attitudes, and values that inform their art, particularly as they may be contrasted to Western ideas about the same issues. Some of these artists' fundamental philosophical and aesthetic premises, such as those concerning the artist's role as a creator or his relationship to the materials he uses, are antithetical to Western presumptions, while other ideas essential to Japanese sensibility, such as the conception of an inner being in inanimate objects, have no counterparts in Western thought.

In Western civilization most conceptions of the universe, religious and secular, support the principle of hierarchical order with God dominant over man and man dominant over nature, as well as the duality of an imperfect natural world distinct from a realm of divine perfection to which transcendence is possible only after death. Most other civilizations do not subscribe to such a dualistic conception. In Japanese culture the universe has been traditionally conceived as a single, indivisible manifestation of matter and spirit. The two major spiritual and philosophical currents within Japanese civilization, Shinto and Buddhism, stress the unity of divinity and nature. Shinto, a uniquely Japanese religion, affirms the presence of many deities in the physical world and their intervention in human affairs, and it exalts man's harmony with nature through ritual observances and the individual's experience of nature. Buddhism, which was introduced into Japan in the sixth century, is more metaphysical than Shinto, stressing the possibility of individual transcendence through meditation and higher consciousness, yet Buddhism, especially the unique Japanese adaptation and practice of Zen, shares something of Shinto's worldliness in presuming that transcendence can be attained in and through the habitable world and during a human lifetime.

Although the artists represented in *A Primal Spirit* do not profess to be creating religious or devotional art, deeply ingrained Shinto and Buddhist attitudes inform their work, as surely as Judeo-Christian concepts inform secular traditional and contemporary Western art. There are insights to be gained about the work of these ten artists by considering their art in the context of elemental precepts of Shinto and Zen.



What is most significant about Shinto is its location of the generative forces and spirits that created the universe within and throughout the natural world and its profound sense of man's total engagement with creation. So thorough was this involvement that in the development of Shinto "there was no word for Nature, as something apart and distinct from man. . . . Man was treated as an integral part of a whole, closely associated and identified with the elements and forces of the world about him."<sup>1</sup> The early Japanese "took it for granted that the natural world was the original world; that is, they did not look for another order of meaning behind the phenomenal, natural world."<sup>2</sup> There was no separate realm wherein the deities segregated themselves from the rest of creation, but a single universe suffused by spiritual and vital presences, or *kami*.

Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801), an oft-cited student of Shinto, wrote:

Speaking in general . . . it may be said that *kami* signifies, in the first place, the deities of heaven and earth that appear in the ancient records and also the spirits of the shrines where they are worshipped. It is hardly necessary to say that it includes human beings. It also includes such objects as birds, beasts, trees, plants, seas, mountains, and so forth. In ancient usage, anything whatsoever which was outside the ordinary, which possessed superior power, or which was awe-inspiring was called *kami*.<sup>3</sup>

Shinto has sometimes been described as nature worship, but in fact it does not advocate the worship of natural things per se but of the spirit present within things, affirming "the sacrality of the total world (cosmos) permeated as it [is] by the *kami* (sacred) nature."<sup>4</sup> Only remotely related to totemism, which posits the existence of magical powers in the universe that can be summoned forth by a shaman and enter or take the form of objects, Shinto is more a devotional religion given to the ritual celebration of the forces that created nature and animate its great rhythms and cycles.

How different is this vision of man's innately empathetic existence with nature from the Judeo-Christian account of man's divine mandate to subdue and dominate an inhospitable wilderness through which he is con-

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1. Shunzo Sakamaki, "Shinto: Japanese Ethnocentrism," in *The Japanese Mind: Essentials of Japanese Philosophy and Culture*, Charles A. Moore, ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987 edition), 24.

2. Joseph M. Kitagawa, *On Understanding Japanese Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 44.

3. Motoori Norinaga quoted in Ryusaku Tsunoda et al., eds., *Sources of the Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 23.

4. Kitagawa, *Japanese Religion*, 44.



demned to roam in exile from Paradise.

It might seem farfetched, given the industrialized technocracy that Japan has become, to suggest that Shinto concepts of man's harmony with nature survive today as anything more than a quaintness—as a wistful nostalgia for a mythologized nature that has been all but obliterated from common experience by the Japanese megalopolis—or that its citizens' involvement with nature is any more substantial than enjoying the changes of the seasons and the festivals that celebrate them. Yet Shinto awareness of man's involvement with nature indeed survives, not merely in the Japanese love of nature but as an ethos and a basic element of cultural consciousness that extends to every aspect of domestic life, such as how space is arranged in a room, how food is prepared and presented, how a work of art is created.

A Japanese sculptor taking up a stone or a piece of wood performs an act very different from that of a Western artist confronting the same material. If it were possible that the two might independently create forms that were identical in every physical characteristic, the artists' individual perceptions would still be remarkably divergent, governed largely by a complex of interrelated, culturally ingrained presumptions about materiality—the physical “stuff” of art—arrangement and form, and the creative act itself.

To a Western artist material is usually envisioned as a crude resource to be exploited and manipulated, to bear the imprint of the artist's unique style and technique. Such an attitude stands in stark contrast to that of Japanese artists such as Chuichi Fujii, who asserts, “I believe that wood is, essentially, no different from humans: it breathes air, it cries. If I am responsive to the wood, then it will also be responsive to me.”<sup>5</sup> Fujii has also stated that the tree “loves”<sup>6</sup> the extreme stresses to which he subjects it in order to achieve the spectacular contortions of its natural form in his art. It might impress a Westerner as discordant to describe the radical distortion of the tree's natural form, through a process of physical strain, as somehow sympathetic or harmonious with nature or as something that the tree could somehow “love”; the process would seem to inflict something more akin to torture. And such an affirmation is all the more surprising when we realize that Fujii does not work with living trees but with gigantic logs purchased from the commercial lumber industry: the fact that Fujii's felled trees are no longer alive does not diminish his regard for their intuitively known inner being.

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5. Unless otherwise indicated all quotations from the artists have been taken from the transcripts of interviews conducted by Judith Connor Greer of the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art in 1989. More extensive passages can be found in the portfolio section of this catalogue.

6. Chuichi Fujii in conversation with the author, October 1988.



Indeed, the impulse that motivates most of the artists in *A Primal Spirit* is less an intent to coerce and manipulate the material as an aspect of artistic control than to engage and bring out what they describe—vaguely, but continually—as this inner being. The consistency with which these and other Japanese artists express this concept is remarkable. Kimio Tsuchiya, for example, states that his intention is “to bring out and present the life of nature emanating from this energy of trees.”<sup>7</sup> He further reflects that “in using wood it is not that I am simply cutting and using trees that have lasted for hundreds of years. . . . It is as though the wood is a part of myself, as though the wood has the same level of life force. . . . Wood is not just matter.”

A particularly graphic and emotional description of this inner energy and its relationship to human consciousness is related by another wood sculptor, Shigeo Toya:

One stormy night, I was standing on a road beside a ravine, facing the woods. It had formed a huge black mass which groaned and raved. This raving was not a superficial phenomenon, but rather originated from within. This huge living being had already swallowed the storm. I quietly got into my car and drove away so as not to be noticed by the raging being.<sup>8</sup>

Toya has also described the extremely variegated surfaces of his sculptures, with their swirling gouges carved out by a chain saw and their thousand fingerlike stalks, as enabling the inner energy of the wood to interpenetrate—and be interpenetrated by—that of the rest of the world.<sup>9</sup>

Many contemporary Japanese artists use forms of the verb *ikasu* (to live) with respect to their materials. Emiko Tokushige, for example, so explains her handling of the palm tree thatching, husks, and tree bark with which she usually works:

I want to leave more of the expression up to the material itself. . . . I have to take it into my hands, but I am not certain to what extent I should do this. I don't want to kill the material. . . . When I think about what I want to create, it is not so much that I feel that I must “consult” with the material, but it is rather like being manipulative in human relationships. I feel terribly guilty

7. Junichi Shiota, *Kimio Tsuchiya, Sculpture 1984–1988* (exh. cat., Tokyo: Moris Gallery, 1988), 3.

8. Shigeo Toya quoted in Toshiaki Minemura, “Leaving Woods to Create ‘Woods,’” in *Shigeo Toya, Woods 1984–1987* (exh. cat., Tokyo: Satani Gallery, 1987), 10.

9. Shigeo Toya in conversation with the author, September 1988.



about it. . . . When I look at a completed work, it is apparent to me whether I stopped at a particular point to allow the materials to live [*ikasu*] or whether I stopped because I became fearful [of destroying the materials]. When I say that I want "to allow the materials to live," it sounds as though I am being very deferential toward them, but it is actually more of a struggle. And this struggle itself is enjoyable and interesting for me. It is this struggle that drives me in the creation of a work.

Like Tokushige, many contemporary Japanese artists regard their materials not as passive matter enlisted to receive, like a blank slate, the artist's imposed will but as part of the whole of the created universe. Such an idea is manifest in the ceramic-block constructions of Takamasa Kuniyasu: reflecting on the central influence of Zen philosophy on his art, he comments:

As a human being I do not constitute the center of the earth but exist only as a single point within nature's cycle. More than creating the works through my own volition, I feel increasingly passive, as though I am being driven to create them. . . . Natural materials often deviate from my original intentions. . . . By giving up control, I conversely make use of them. . . . I am more interested in those materials that are not obedient to my will.

Kuniyasu's passivity and Tokushige's struggle have virtually the same intent: the aspiration toward an intuitive and respectful engagement of their materials and of nature, of which they—artist and materials alike—are a part. The work of art is the locus and record of that engagement. As Shigeo Toya has said, "I want my work to be a place of encounter with something that is greater than I am."

Not all contemporary Japanese artists are content to attribute such spirituality to their materials nor to an engagement of natural forces, and some even resist the imputation of a special "Japaneseness" to their art. Tadashi Kawamata, surely the most self-consciously cosmopolitan artist in *A Primal Spirit*, makes a point of his reservations: "I don't subscribe to the notion [that the Japanese value the inherent spiritual qualities of wood]. Artists in other countries use wood. I think it is rather farfetched to assume that the use of wood in Japanese art is equivalent to animism. . . . Foreigners often depend on unusual interpretations in order to find something 'Japanese.'" Kawamata is firm in his assertions that his art has nothing to do with nature but is involved instead with urban architecture and the dynamics of urban growth. Yet for all his skepticism of such attitudes Kawamata readily



describes his artistic intent in words that sound strikingly similar to those of many of the other artists in *A Primal Spirit* and explains his art through the use of metaphors that deal not with cities and man-made things but with nature and natural materials:

I try to be "submissive" to the materials that a site possesses. I use the space of a building or materials relating to the building, or I break up the interior of a building and [use] the scraps. . . . By using materials in this way, my work becomes assimilated with that from which the materials originate. This is a very important part of the concept underlying my work: the relationship is parasitic. I once said in an interview that my concept of materials can be compared with cancer. . . . My work can be called a cancerous or parasitic organization within an organization.

The common intent in all of these statements, Kawamata's included, is to see the work of art not as an independent, autonomous object, discrete in the world and divisible from everything not defined by its physical form, but rather as a living process that engages and assimilates and extends other processes and qualities, particularly natural ones, through time and space. The works are conceived and created with the aspiration that they will engage and participate in the larger forces of creation, growth, destruction, and decay in nature.

This is not a new concept in Japanese art; the aspiration toward engagement is in fact quite ancient and pervasive in Japanese culture, and there is a striking analogy between the contemporary art represented in *A Primal Spirit* and the traditional Japanese art of bonsai, the cultivation of trees or shrubs in small pots. Contrary to many Westerners' beliefs, bonsai trees are not miniatures: they are the same species that grow huge and wild in the forest. In bonsai the tree is continually pruned and trained to grow around stiff copper wires, not in order to subdue and dominate it but rather to engage and reveal, to draw forth and release the tree's inner nature, its characteristic form and life force. Whereas Westerners are wont to find something grotesque and "unnatural" in the human intervention into and distortion of the growth process of a tree, the Japanese perceive a beauty in the instance of man's engagement of nature, its rhythms and forms, revealed gradually through time and space. To Japanese sensibilities the bonsai tree is a microcosm of all life, revealed in a ritualized drama that requires extraordinary patience and contemplative recollection. It is highly significant that in this notion of deliberate intervention into and arrangement of nature man is not perceived as subtracting from the tree's inner essence, which abides un-



diminished and unadulterated. Its outward physical form is a contingency, a variable, a function of circumstance, and the visible register of the inner force's encounter with the rest of the world. Artistic form, then, is the momentary record of an ongoing process involving the artist's encounter of and participation in natural forces through his chosen material.

In modern Western art an object's form is its physical certitude, and though it might change over time—through deterioration or the artist's intent—its form is conceived as the sum of its absolute physical properties. We in the West generally define form in the visual arts in opposition to chaos and change; it is complete and static, the end product of many artistic decisions.

By contrast, form in Japanese sculpture is conceived to be generated by change or flux itself. Indeed, the concept of completion is antithetical to much contemporary Japanese art: form is an event within an ongoing process that never truly ends. This concept is not new in Japanese culture and can be found at its very heart. Near the city of Ise in south-central Japan is Shinto's most important national sanctuary, the Great Shrine. There, in the midst of a densely wooded and rugged terrain, a wooden wall encloses an acre or two of stark, perfectly flat land; within that sanctified place, a second wooden barrier ritually demarcates a sacred *kami* zone; at its center stands a wooden tabernacle or ark that for two thousand years has contained Shinto's most sacred objects: the mirror and the polished jewels that, according to the first imperial chronicles, were used to coax the sun goddess Amaterasu out of hiding, thereby restoring light to the world and ultimately enabling the creation of her descendants, the Japanese race and its imperial clan.

The Great Shrine is an ancient and enduring place, but every twenty years since the seventh century the shrine has been completely dismantled and rebuilt—identical in every detail—with new wood. This rebuilding is, of course, as much a ritual of renewal and rebirth as it is a maintenance activity, but it is also a manifestation of the Japanese notion of physical form as a provisional arrangement of parts in time and space. The sacred precinct of Ise remains a fixed and constant place; as a physical object the shrine has been discarded again and again for the past thirteen hundred years. To Western perceptions the rebuilding of the shrine causes another shrine to exist, but to the Japanese it is the same shrine in the same place, having the same function, suffused with the same holiness, containing the same *kami*.

The profound conception of arrangement that so pervades Japanese visual culture and daily life is an affirmation of unity in the created world, a unity revealed in the integrity of each of its divisible parts. Arrangement is practiced in myriad ways, from the disciplines of architecture and garden design, through the contemplative exercise of *ikebana*, floral compositions, to



the practical art of *bento*, the exquisite boxed arrangements of assorted morsels of food. Each of these traditions of creative expression is venerated for its satisfaction of various human needs and pleasures, but the constant is the cultivated regard for the relationship of the whole to its parts and of each part to every other—in other words, an apprehension of the whole, or macrocosm, read through its individual elements.

The concept of the collective, synthetic nature of the whole is implied in Kimio Tsuchiya's vision of a life force that suffuses all individual parts: "When a tree is cut, it doesn't mean that the wood is dead; life remains, even if it is cut into fine pieces, even if it is made into small boards—the life of the tree remains in each small division." Tsuchiya's art consists not of isolated fragments of trees or separated splints of wood, but of irregularly shaped pieces arranged in large, rudimentary shapes such as semi-circles and spirals. It is in the process of gathering and arranging random bits and pieces of irregular wood that Tsuchiya affirms the unity and coherence of the whole. Thus, while he and the other artists represented in *A Primal Spirit* surely look into the inner being of their materials, they direct their vision outward in the act of creation to assert a transcendent wholeness that can be discerned in the least division or unit of their arrangements.

It is, then, a Japanese sense of arrangement, much more than a Western sense of object-bound form, that characterizes their art. Koichi Ebizuka's multifaceted arrangements of wood and rocks, for example, are complex organizations of interdependent parts. Vertical and horizontal elements, tall and low forms, cleanly defined geometric shapes and craggy, irregular ones are juxtaposed. These compositions flow from part to part and have no particular vantage point, no single view, no central focus. Ebizuka is quite deliberate in not labeling his works as "objects"—that is, as static, immutable entities—or as "constructions," observing that, for him, the latter word has Western connotations of "something very solid" and fixed; rather, he speaks of them as "productions," preferring that word's suggestion of active engagement and organization. It is significant that Ebizuka sometimes cannibalizes or recycles the wood members of his compositions to create new ones, for he defines his art not in the absoluteness of any structure it generates but in the temporal arrangement of its parts.

For all the sculptors in *A Primal Spirit* arrangement, or the process of organization, is more significant than the particular form or structure that results. Kazuo Kenmochi's assertion that "I don't want to create something that has a definite form," succinctly expresses an attitude shared by these and other Japanese artists. Indeed, for many of them the form or structure of their works is often unplanned, sometimes accidental. Tadashi Kawamata relates that as an art student he realized that he was "really more



interested in arranging space" and materials than in painting and making conventional—that is, Western-type—art objects, and that "it seemed much more interesting to show this process of work, where things can change or happen by accident as the work goes along." Similarly, Chuichi Fujii explains that "I always start off with some idea, but when facing the actual work it may not turn out as I had planned in the beginning." Of course, for any artist, Japanese or Western, unanticipated creative opportunities and unforeseen results will be generated in the course of working; it would be rare indeed if a work of art were to turn out precisely as it had been conceived. But for many Japanese artists the moment of accident is an encounter with the wholeness of the world, with the conditions and processes that animate the totality of creation.

Often such accidents take the form of a material "emergency"—the wood that will not bend, the stone that breaks, the structure that cannot stand. But whereas for a Western artist such conditions might be thought to interfere with the realization of the envisioned work of art, for these Japanese sculptors it is precisely the unknown and uncontrollable factors that offer their fullest engagement with a universe in a state of perpetual animation. To be truly whole, and to truly reflect its universality, the work of art must be susceptible to and engaged in the conditions of the universe, even if that ultimately results in the transformation or destruction of the work: "I have no problem with accidental occurrences nor do I believe that a work needs to last a long time. . . . I think that it is sufficient for a work to last for only a moment." This statement by Ebizuka, reflecting a widely held Buddhist understanding of the universe as being in a perpetual state of flux, suggests that the completeness of a work is not to be found only in the integration of separate parts into an organized arrangement but also in its disintegration into fragments or debris.

Most artists represented in *A Primal Spirit* have affirmed that impermanence is an elemental physical fact of their works of art as well as an essential aesthetic factor in the perception of their works. Indeed, they are deeply attracted to impermanence, destruction, and decay. Kawamata says, "I want to concentrate on temporariness, not permanence," and is perfectly content to see his works dismantled or destroyed in the endless cycle of creation and destruction in the urban environment. Takamasa Kuniyasu's ceramic-block arrangements in gallery spaces are, for simple practical reasons, dismantled and moved away after the duration of the exhibition. But truer to Kuniyasu's vision is the much less perceptible but equally real impermanence of his outdoor works that sometimes are left to disintegrate and merge with their natural surroundings—the trees and vines that, in time, overgrow them, the rain, snow, and extremes of temperature that crumble them, the



wind that scatters them, the earth itself, to which they return. Kuniyasu reflects, "I never think of my work as something that will last forever. The materials I use are bound to decay and deteriorate over time. . . . I don't mind if, in the end, a work crumbles and decays, if that is what happens naturally."

Emiko Tokushige, whose chosen media are tree bark, thatching, and fiber, has considered using steel, not for its hard, "permanent" qualities, but because "I am attracted to its roughness and to the fact that it would become rusty and decay." Kazuo Kenmochi, pondering the fate of his towers, muses that "sometimes I feel that if the work fell over it would be equally satisfying to me. . . . I would like to go to the very limit. If it then falls over, it can't be helped." He further reflects:

When I was a child, I lived close to the sea and made things from sand: mountains, pyramids, and Mount Fuji. When you create something from sand, your creation is being destroyed while still in the process of creation. No matter how much you continue to build something, the wind keeps breaking it down and it continues to crumble. Rather than making a perfect pyramid, I am more attracted to a work that shows such gradual changes. . . . I cannot defeat nature, and I am not even sure that I would dare to challenge it. I don't care if a work of mine is destroyed by the wind or rots in the rain. It is part of a cycle of life.

Clearly, for many of these artists, the viewer's recognition of the mutability of these works is as important—perhaps more important—to the proper understanding of the works as the physical form of the works themselves. Contrasting to Western modernist orthodoxies, which maintain that the art object shall be created according to aesthetic and formal precepts determined by the artist and shall exist in the world as an autonomous entity, the intent of many Japanese artists is to proffer their creations as aspects of the universe, functioning within and as part of a larger natural order that both includes the object and transcends the artist's engagement of that order. For the artists in *A Primal Spirit*, the very significance of their art is that it is conceived as having a destiny larger than whatever manipulations they as artists have imposed upon their materials.

Thus Kenmochi's vision of his works as existing within and as part of a greater "cycle of life" is more than just an acceptance of the perishability of materials; he implies that the cycle is the very mechanism whereby the work assumes its function in the universe and its significance in the minds of artist and viewer alike. The same concept is also articulated by Isamu



Wakabayashi, whose room-sized arrangements, which may include objects made of iron, lead, copper, or sulfur, often reveal the slow processes—rusting, burning, corrosion—through which nature operates imperceptibly but surely. Wakabayashi speaks of a vaguely defined but all-important “cycle of existence,” in whose slow processes he

as an artist can become involved. Isn't this what making art means? . . . Perhaps it is a unique Japanese way of thinking. In Buddhist terms this would be described as the “coexistence” with materials. . . . Although it is the individual daily things and fragmentary things that one is involved with, it is the vision of the greater picture, and my involvement in that, that becomes one of the foundations for the creation of a work.

While these Japanese sculptors presume that their works are incomplete fragments of nature, they maintain always an aspiration to come to a comprehension, through their art, of the completeness of nature and man's place in nature. Toshikatsu Endo conceives his art as a kind of rite undertaken to fulfill man's perpetual desire for completeness and unity with the universe. Influenced by Zen teachings, Endo states that he believes “first of all that we exist in a state of incompleteness,” and that his art represents “an urge or impulse to fill in . . . that part that [is] missing.” As a youth, Endo recalls, “I didn't understand what I was searching for but was driven to search by a force that continues to move me to this day. . . . But, of course, I can never really fill in the missing part, so I must continue to create my works.” Endo's art—his “search”—often takes the form of simple circular arrangements of stones, sections of wood, or, occasionally, bronze, steel, or iron, which he views not as industrial products but as ores rendered up by the earth in the fiery smelting process. Fire, in fact, almost always plays a role in Endo's work, for he deforms by burning or scorching the wood or stone elements that are not originally formed by fire. Water, too, often appears as an element that survives burning, contained in ringlike channels or wells within the large circular arrangements. Endo often lists earth, air, fire, and water among the media from which he forges his sculptural forms. These primal, generative “media” suggest both the origins and ends of the creation and all life-forms. “So,” reflects Endo on the spiritual inspiration of his art, “it is all connected: the concepts underlying my work, the genesis of human life, the questions of life and death.”

No aspect of this art more clearly differentiates it from recent Western sculpture nor, more important, better characterizes its distinctly Japanese spirituality than the belief that these works of art are connected—



physically and conceptually—to the farthest reaches of all that lies beyond the objects themselves. Each of the works in *A Primal Spirit* engages, is penetrated by, and corresponds to primal forces in nature over time and in real space. Even the most empirical and least overtly spiritual of the sculptors, Tadashi Kawamata, has expressed a profound belief in the “connectedness” of his architecturally generated structures to a wholeness that they engage:

If you let your hand follow along the real walls of a gallery, eventually you will end up on the outside wall of the building. I began to think that the walls I made could also be continued: so from the inside of the gallery they could go to the entrance and from there outside to the external walls and then to the walls of the surrounding buildings. The space between the buildings could then become a space from which the work continued. Everything comes out from the inside; it is all connected. The gallery walls are connected to the exterior walls; the building walls are in a sense the location's inside walls; the location is part of a town; the town is part of the country. And so the circle widens. There is no limit.

Though he professes no spirituality in his art Kawamata shares the same sensibility and philosophical outlook of others who do assert the connectedness and the universality of their art. Takamasa Kuniyasu, for example, who acknowledges the profound influence of traditional Zen Buddhism on his own attitudes, expresses closely related concepts, particularly with regard to his perception of the individual's continuity with the external world and its realization through art: “I am trying to find a form of expression that allows me to feel the self as a single part of a greater circle. . . . It is perhaps an interpretation of the world or of the universe, the cosmos, that I want to create.”

To find points of connection, to transcend the present moment in time and the present point in space, to discover the origins and ends of creation—these are the impulses that impel the artists in *A Primal Spirit*. Kazuo Kenmochi says, “I want to create something that goes beyond my imagination. It is like coming close to the gods [*kami*—if indeed there are gods.” Toshikatsu Endo describes his art as “one long story. We all have a story of genesis, a story of how the world began. Man has continued endlessly to produce these stories. Artworks are also stories.” As if echoing the thought, Chuichi Fujii states his belief that art “must be something that calls to mind the starting point, the origin, of humanity.” Takamasa Kuniyasu, reflecting on a philosophical, if not formal, affinity between his work and traditional Buddhist art, sees both as conveying a “spiritual message” that



"could be interpreted perhaps as a form of prayer or an even profounder philosophy, something that we all share deep down in ourselves." And Koichi Ebizuka finds in sculpture "a tool for contemplating the universe."

Many Japanese artists working today create work that, to Western observers, appears contemporary in form and execution and recalls episodes in recent Western art. The sculpture presented in *A Primal Spirit* and much other contemporary Japanese art, however, does not disclose its true content when submitted to modernist or postmodernist notions current in the West. As we have seen, it follows other traditions that remain generally unperceived by Western viewers. Yet the works themselves, elemental in material, direct in execution, and imposing in scale, certainly are accessible to any audience. In their deeper content they reflect profoundly ingrained Japanese cultural attitudes, and they perpetuate certain timeless values and beliefs. It might be possible to perceive in these works a general reactionary response to contemporary Japanese culture, but the artists themselves regard their art as progressive, current, and evolutionary; they are consciously working with Japanese artistic traditions in a fully contemporary manner.

The concept of culture implies a lore, a received body of knowledge, wisdom, and sensibility that explains the past and provides a context for the present and a basis for the future. By definition, culture is—or always has been—the continuity of a civilization and the perpetuation of its experiences and beliefs. Today, however, it appears that the pace of cultural developments may have outstripped our capacity to assimilate and comprehend our civilization. Perhaps culture is now to be conceived as an ever-shifting mass consensus, as new as this morning's newscast and as old as yesterday's, a consensus not physically fixed in a geographic place, but immaterial as information, evanescent and protean as communication itself. We must ask if there will be a viable concept of culture in the future. This is a question no one is prepared to answer, and it is surely not the primary consideration of the artists represented in *A Primal Spirit*. But though their purposes are artistic and spiritual, in choosing to look deeply into their own culture they demonstrate its vitality and the creative resources to be derived from its continuity.