

Tadasu Fujii (art critic)

Between A World With Gravity and A World Without

In Muneyoshi Hase's recent exhibition, all exhibited works are wall-mounted, prompting me to reflect on the concept of gravity in sculpture. While this association may seem unexpected, since the concept of gravity in sculpture is typically explored via freestanding sculptures in the round rather than by reliefs displayed on walls. Many prominent figures in the history of sculpture are characterized by their vertical elongation and minimal contact with the ground: sculptures typically stand to counteract the force of gravity.

However, this trait is not intrinsic to Hase's sculptural works. Even when placed on the floor, his pieces rarely "stand" in the traditional sense; rather, they are typically "arranged" or "layered/stacked." Additionally, when assembled in stacks, these sculptures seldom attain notable heights. Hase's creations exist in concert with gravitational forces, rather than in opposition to them.

In this solo exhibition, in addition to the objects being "arranged" and "layered/stacked", they are also "fixed" and "suspended" for the wall-mounted display, and this is when - by being "fixed and "suspended"- the presence of gravity is brought to the fore.

In fact, Hase has been exploring the subject of gravity through various forms. His choice of materials has remained largely consistent: aged timber has been used since the 1980s; polyethylene rubbish bags were introduced following his extended stay in the United Kingdom; and printed circuit boards for computers and children's toys started to appear in his works after he returned to Japan. These materials evoke a range of associations and interpretations for observers, yet they are perceived in distinctly different contexts in terms of their relationship to gravity. Specifically, their spatial characteristics—whether planar

or three-dimensional, with or without depth—affect this perception. The processes of arranging, stacking, securing, and suspending further highlight these differences.

The current exhibition features four works displayed in a large space and one work in a smaller space. As always have been, Hase's works remain untitled, hence for clarity they are referenced here by numbers in clockwise order from the large space to the small space.

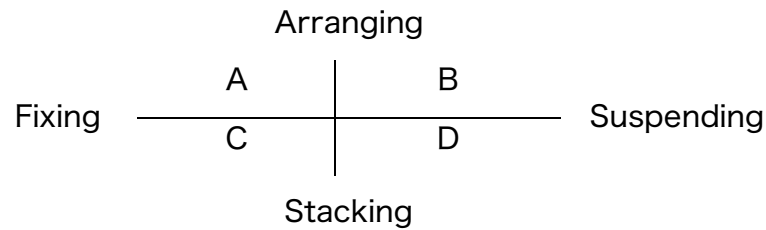
In the large space:

- (1) A large, used transparent vinyl sheet is affixed to the wall with pieces of old wood attached mainly along the upper edge and to the left side.
- (2) Children's clothing is grouped together and hung, with the upper sections covered in aluminum foil.
- (3) Children's toys are grouped and enclosed in transparent sheeting, then hung.
- (4) Sheets cut from two types of polyethylene rubbish bags—the black sheet over the white sheet, slightly offset—are glued together, with a narrow strip of wood with nails stuck on it.

In the smaller space:

- (5) A composition featuring printed circuit boards for computers aligned along a central axis, with children's toys arranged around them in a scattering manner.

While these works exhibit diversity, they may be systematically classified to the certain categories according to the schema outlined below. In Hase's recent works, "fixing" and "suspending" are best viewed as the modes of formation rather than attachment techniques. For example, when thin sheets are attached to the top, surface adhesion to the wall conveys a sense of "fixing." Within this context, item (1) is assigned to category A, item (2) to category D, item (3) to category B, and item (4) to category C.



The design characteristics of "fixed" objects remain consistent whether placed on the floor or the wall; changing perspective by ninety degrees does not significantly alter their characteristics. Consequently, Hase's recent explorations of gravity are consistent with the approaches demonstrated in his earlier works; however, it is noteworthy that the visual equilibrium in these compositions is placed towards the upper section. By contrast, the "suspended" works are indicative of their distinctly different relationship to gravity compared to the floor-based sculptures: as for in the latter, the force of gravity pulls down towards the floor and not towards any other direction. Such a paradigm therefore represents more of the contrasting nature from Hase's floor-based works rather than the continued similarities from his previous works.

One may argue, however, that what is crucial in this exhibition is less the unified adoption of one form than the plurality of ways sculpture can engage with gravity. Indeed, Hase intentionally avoids stylistic uniformity, and this avoidance seems to suggest that the relationship of the sculptures and gravity can no longer be seen to be specific nor fixed. Historically, sculptors have maintained a defined relationship with gravity in their work – be it positively or negatively – or it was even taken for granted as a self-evident element of their practice. Yet Hase's disposition on this matter is distinctly different: gravity lies beyond human agency. His works do not strive against gravity, nor do they simply acquiesce; rather, they demonstrate that sculpture inherently exists within gravity.

This attitude may perhaps reflect our broader existential condition: in our present world, gravity is no longer felt as palpable a certainty as before. Of course, the force of terrestrial gravity itself still works the same way on the

earth. What has changed now is our perception—many of us now feel the digital world within a smartphone to be more real than the physical one. It is not surprising that this shift has also affected artistic expression. Whether in painting or in sculpture, in recent years one increasingly encounters artistic expression focusing on weightlessness and absence of the presence of shadow. The main issue at stake here is not digital technology itself, but how it has gradually reduced the presence of shadow and gravity in our daily life. It seems that Hase, on the other hand, is trying to reassess the link between gravity and reality.

The work (5) in the smaller space, nominally falls under the category A, yet it displays a markedly different outlook. Whereas the other works are inclining towards density and clustering, here we find a gesture of dispersal. This echoes certain qualities of installation art—a wholeness of object and space—while nonetheless retaining the autonomy of sculpture, with its distinct relationship with centre and periphery.

The core section is primarily composed of printed circuits and for computers other PC parts such as a casing and a keyboard. Arranged along a vertical axis, these elements evoke gravity without the act of “suspension”. A near-symmetry induces an impression of gravitational order, yet that verticality remains unsettled. As the electrical devices are man-made, so individual parts are rectangular shaped, yet they are placed together to create slightly distorted grids. While the overall framework of straight vertical and horizontal lines guides the work, the distortion of lines conveys a visual sense of instability.

Towards the peripheral of the composition, the elements are arranged more loosely in a scattered manner, with particular focus on toy fish made from resin and drawings of fish by Hase himself. Collectively, these elements create an aquatic ambiance in which the force of gravity is less felt. The dynamic between the solid toy fish—possessing actual weight—and the pictorial representations—offering only the illusion of gravity—blurs the distinctions regarding the orientation of force, whether vertical or horizontal. This ambiguity, further

emphasized by the installation-like nature, appears to extend throughout the entire room.

I wonder whether I risk overinterpreting, if I dare to suggest that this shift from a unified centre to a fragmented edge metaphorically reflect a wider cultural move, from assuming gravity to questioning it.

(Translated by Yukiko SUMI BARNETT)