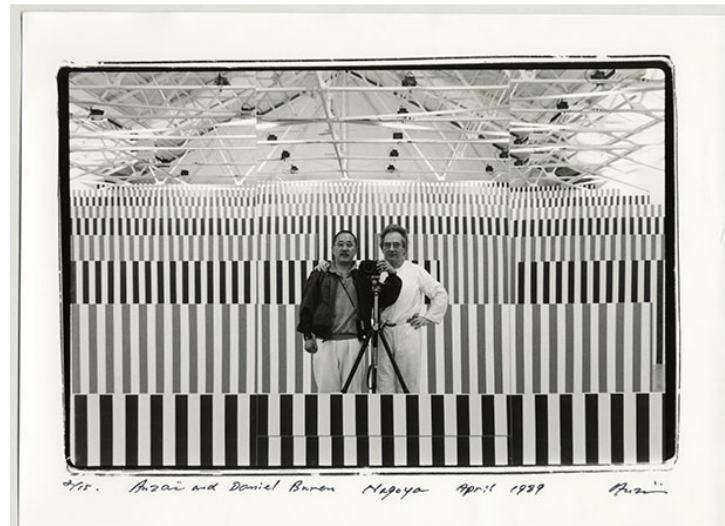




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Shigeo Anzai's pictures from an exhibition (or two)

A new show features the photographer who documented the nation's art movements including Mono-ha



Shigeo Anzai, Daniel Buren, The 10th Tokyo Biennale '70 -- Between Man and Matter, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. May, 1970, baryta-coated silver print. Courtesy the artist and White Rainbow, London.

Shortly before Christmas a great little show opened at [White Rainbow](#) in London. It's actually the first of two shows (the second is in May) at the gallery featuring the work of Japanese photographer Shigeo Anzai.

Anzai is pretty much unknown outside Japan, which is odd considering that during his lifetime he's photographed the likes of Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama, Joseph Beuys, Takashi Murakami, David Hockney, Christo and Richard Serra to name but a few and has catalogued numerous important art movements and shows since the early 1970s. Anzai's photography is pretty much an index of recent Japanese art history and where it encountered, or was exposed to, international movements.

So many of the images in the show are of ephemeral art, work that lasted for just a moment and then was gone forever. So his photos are of historical importance in terms of Japan's contemporary art scene as well as the international art scene.

He's most closely linked with the Japanese Mono-ha (School of Things) art movement of the early 1970s which explored the encounter between, and the space surrounding, natural and industrial materials, such as stone, steel, glass, cotton, wood, wire, rope and water, arranging them in mostly unaltered, ephemeral states.

It emerged in response to a number of social, cultural and political precedents set in the 1960s. With the exception of Lee Ufan, who was a decade older, most of the Mono-ha artists were at the start of their careers when the violent student protests of 1968–69 occurred.



Shigeo Anzai, Christo, The 10th Tokyo Biennale '70 — Between Man and Matter, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. May, 1970, baryta-coated silver print. Courtesy the artist and White Rainbow, London.

that the term *Mona-ha* itself, was first applied as a pejorative one to describe the trend among Japanese artists of placing or arranging natural or industrial materials directly on the ground or other surfaces. *Mona-ha* insisted on the removal of the artist's voice altogether, critiquing human agency and production by employing 'unmediated' materials," the chapter reads.



Shigeo Anzai, Richard Serra, The 10th Tokyo Biennale '70 — Between Man and Matter, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. May, 1970, baryta-coated silver print. Courtesy the artist and White Rainbow, London.

"Refuting the idea that the world is 'nothing but a territory to be colonized' by man and his abstract concepts, philosopher artist Lee Uffan presented *Mona-ha* as a return to a pre-rational recognition of the elemental 'process of seeing, feeling and touching each other in interactive relationships'.

As *Art in Time* points out, the first *Mona-ha* work is generally accepted to be Nobuo Sekine's *Phase Mother Earth* – an artwork Anzai documented and has a story to tell about.

It is a cylinder of stratified earth excavated from an identically sized hole, hardened and recast by mixing cement into the soil. "Phase Mother Earth was demolished at the end of its initial exhibition and refabricated on site for all subsequent shows. This impermanence and reliance on the environment, common to Mono-ha works, emphasizes the relationship between viewer, site and artwork," according to Art in Time. We asked Shigeo Anzai what he



Shigeo Anzai, Daniel Buren, The 10th Tokyo Biennale '70 – Between Man and Matter, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum.

The White Rainbow show mainly centres on Anzai's photographs circa 1970–76, we wondered why he chose to photograph the work and how important it was to him.

"I was not the only one to regret the loss and disappearance of artworks without trace when exhibitions ended. When Lee Ufan invited me for a chat to a soba noodle restaurant near his exhibition in the Tamura Gallery, he said that if you are so committed why don't you produce artworks which record ephemeral works? That was the beginning of my practice." He described the artists as "extremely free, with confidence and conviction. I admire their sense of translucence which is still valid today. They would explore any possibility or pliability within art." We also asked him for a couple of happy memories from the time.



Shigeo Anzai, Jannis Kounellis, The 10th Tokyo Biennale '70 -- Between Man and Matter, Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum. May, 1970, resin-coated silver print. Courtesy the artist and White Rainbow, London

"In 1969, Hakone Open Air Museum was opened, and from 1973 they ran a prize competition. It was a great opportunity for the younger artists at the time.

Nobuo Sekine showcased a series titled Phase of Nothingness, that had a big piece of natural stone on top of a stainless steel pedestal. This was supposed to be realised with a few Japanese gardeners through traditional methods, but the weight and size made it an impossible task, taking hours with a chain and a pulley to lift the stone. The organiser asked the artist to use a forklift truck but the artist was distressed by this move from his original idea. The work was completed within minutes using heavy equipment, but the artist's face revealed his mixed feelings.

Then, in July 1970, in a very hot and humid Kyoto, Kishio Suga took part in a survey show titled Trends in Japanese Art and a lot of Mono-ha artists participated. Suga exhibited Infinite Situation (window), where he placed a piece of woodblock to jam the sash windows open. Of course, there were many complaints because the museum could not turn on the air-conditioning because of the open window! But Suga himself did not care and did not alter his work. It was a refreshingly poignant scene that's still very much alive in my mind.

The show continues at [White Rainbow](#) in London until January 23 and you can read more about Mono-ha, Gutai, Neo-Dada and a myriad of other art movements in our book [Art in Time: A World History of Styles and Movements](#).