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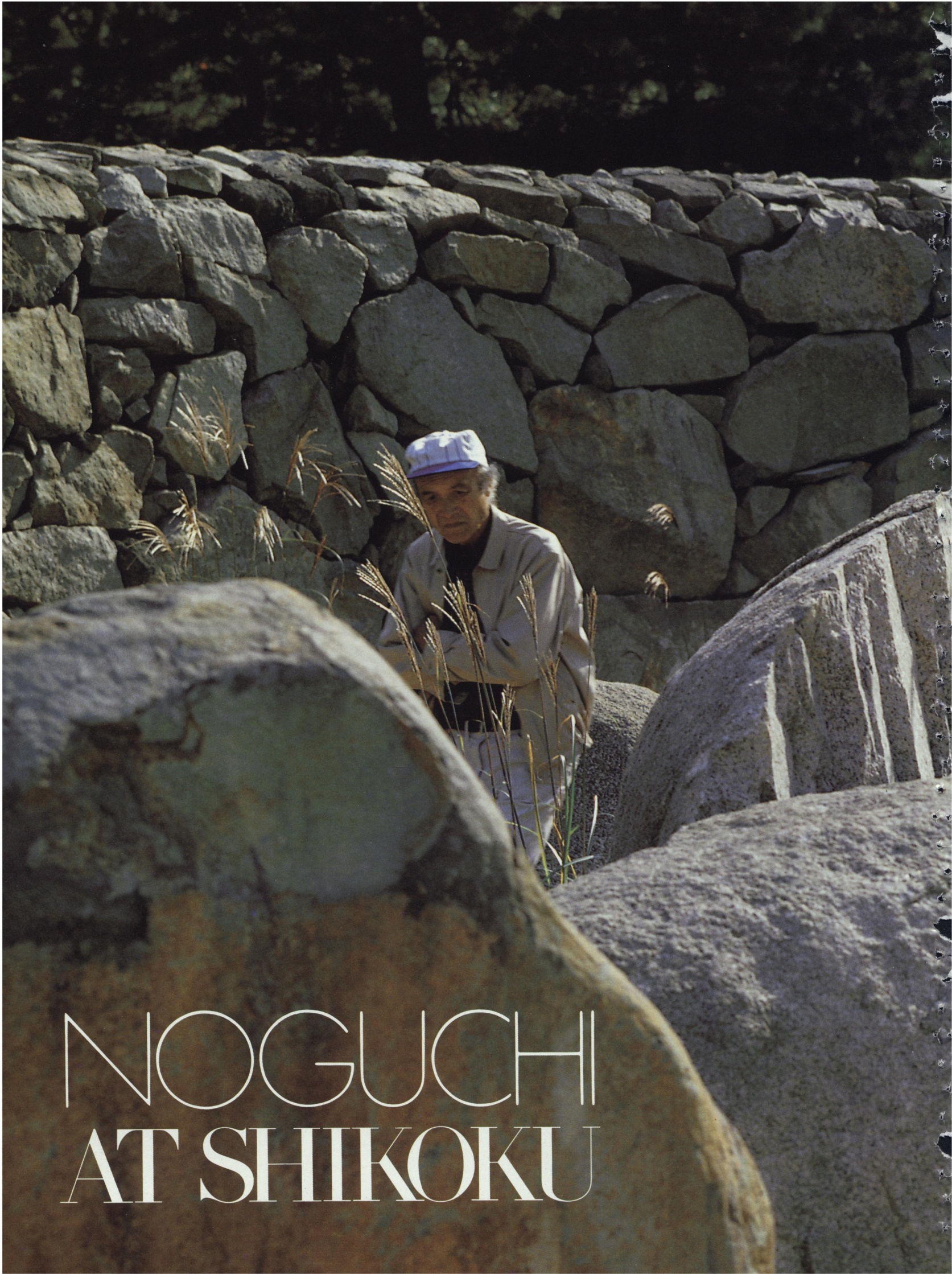
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NOGUCHI AT SHIKOKU

BY BENJAMIN FORGEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHIO NOGUCHI

A visit with the sculptor in his Japanese studio □ Isamu Noguchi began to work regularly on the island of Shikoku in the early 1950s, when he was in need of stones and craftsmen for the UNESCO gardens in Paris, the first of his great landscape-sculpture commissions. It was not until 1969, however, that he purchased a plot of land on the outskirts of Mure, a village of stonecutters and fishermen nestled between mountain ridges and an inlet of Japan's Inland Sea. From that time until his death 19 years later, this working retreat in Japan became one of the two anchors of Noguchi's peripatetic existence (the other was his office-studio-museum in Long Island City, just across the East River from Manhattan).

Health and other commitments permitting, Noguchi would spend half of each year in Mure, divided into two three-month sojourns in fall and spring. It was there that he conceived and executed most of the late stone sculptures for which, among other things, he will be remembered.

I visited Noguchi in Mure in the fall of 1985. From slides he had shown and from published photographs, I'd formed a somewhat misleading impression of his home and studio there. Taken mostly from inside the compound and carefully cropped to hide most telephone and power lines and other evidences of the tightly clustered factories, workshops and residences that make up the town, these told of a walled redoubt much more remote from contemporary civilization than turned out to be the case. Mure is located but a few kilometers from Takamatsu, a gray, medium-sized industrial city. To reach Noguchi's place by taxi one proceeds along a commercial strip typical of modern suburbs the world over—gas stations, retail outlets and fast-food restaurants decorated with large, bright signs and surrounded by parking lots (but as often as not backing up against rice paddies). On weekdays the incessant whine of power saws fills the air, for the town itself is sprinkled with the yards and workshops of stonecutters. In pre-Meiji years, the famous local stone, "Aji-stone" gave the entire region its name. A hard, durable granite that, Noguchi said, "doesn't take moss," Aji-stone is much valued for gravestones and temple lanterns.

Actually, after passing 24 hours in Noguchi's Japan environment, I came to view it much as the artist did. A telephone, a television set and an air conditioner hidden away in his upstairs bedroom were pretty much the only concessions to modernity I noticed, plus, of course, running water and the power tools in the sheds of his great walled sculpture yard. One of the first things Noguchi established that afternoon, after the pleasantries of settling in for a lunch of morning-caught grilled fish on the rear veranda of his house, was to tersely define the place as follows: "This is where things happen in secret, in quiet. This is my hideaway."

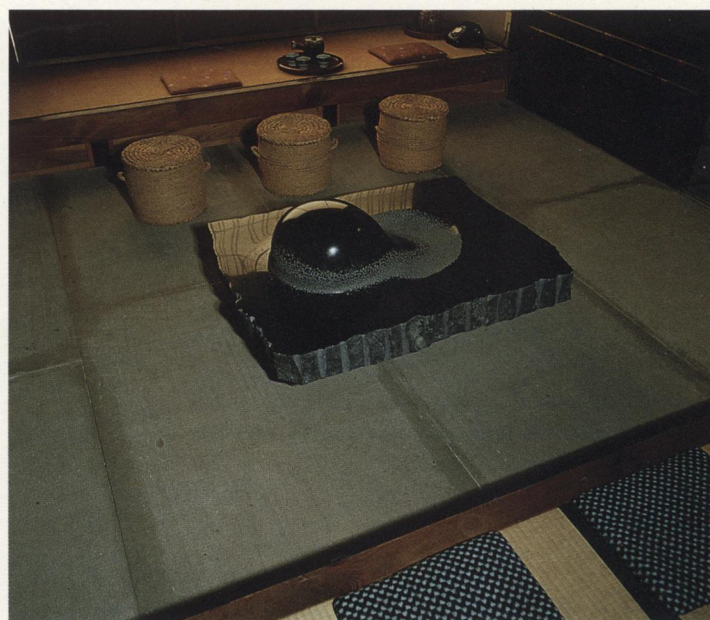
Silent it most certainly was—a Sunday afternoon, with all saws stilled. Noguchi had once referred to the UNESCO gardens as "my Ryoan-ji," comparing that project to the most famous of the Zen dry gardens in Kyoto. But that seemed more a shorthand way of identifying for a western audience the Japanese roots of his landscape aesthetic than a true description. In an important sense this backyard was truly Noguchi's Ryoan-ji, his own contemplative garden: self-made, silent, spare, but a bit rough, too—unpolished. Sequestered by a wall and a stand of bamboo he had planted, its uneven, moss-covered surface was minimally punctuated by a single sculpture, a long, low, slightly twisted rod of dark granite segments.

During lunch Noguchi mentioned that he preferred Ryoan-

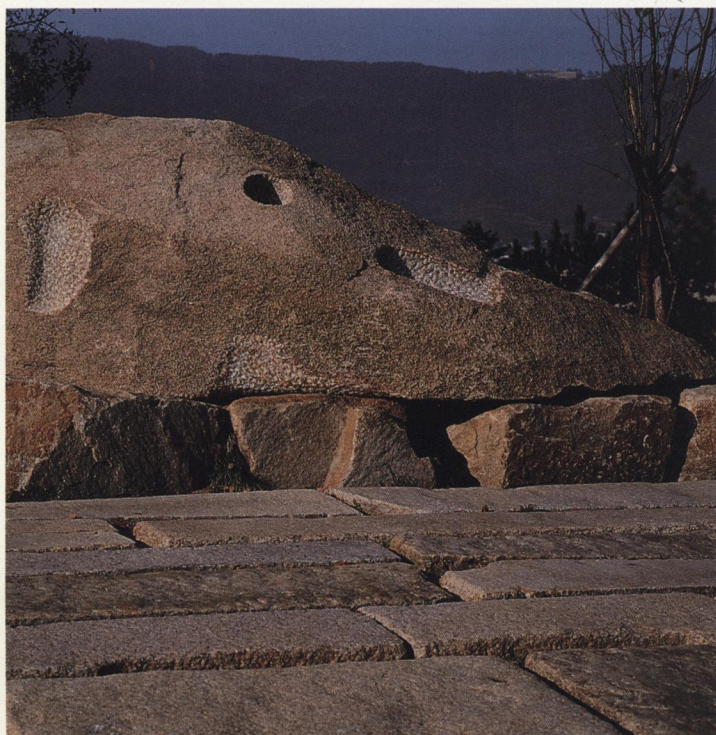
ji the way it used to be half a century ago, when he'd first seen it during his initial return to Japan since his childhood in the fishing village of Chigaseki. Then, he recalled, Ryoan-ji had not been so immaculately kept as it is today (nor was it equipped with the recorded interpretive messages that today erupt periodically, perversely). Though everything in it seemed perfectly placed, Noguchi's own simple garden also had a matter-of-fact feel about it—nature and accident were given their due there, as in the mass and surfaces of his boulder-sculptures. One could easily imagine Noguchi alone on the veranda at day's end, mulling over an afternoon's work, plotting the day to come.

Noguchi was an artist for whom time was of the essence, of course. He kept a tight schedule—as any person at the head of so far-flung an enterprise would have to do, supervising the work of two small, loyal, efficient staffs on two continents. He made deadlines for himself, and worried them. On the occasion of my visit, he was forming the stones for the U.S. pavilion at the 1986 Venice Biennale and for a smaller exhibit of sculptures at a New York gallery. He said he was concerned about the four or five pieces he was planning for the New York show. "Well," he stated candidly, "I've put myself in this prominent position, now I'll have to deliver. Or else I'll be a fake, you know." Noguchi by no means rested on his laurels late in life. "In a sense, what I'm trying to do is to rediscover time in

Opposite: The sculptor in his walled sculpture garden. Below: Within Noguchi's house in the town of Mure, Shikoku Island, Japan



L A N D S C A P E A R C H I T E C T U R E



Above: This huge stone occupies a platform on a hill behind Noguchi's house.
Opposite: Walled garden and studios in Mure

relation to sculpture," he had said. "This is harder with the better stones. You have to have time to do it, time to think before you desecrate it. It will last a long time. Eventually, everything turns into time, time takes care of things."

Most commentators on Noguchi's art and life have stressed the artist's internationalism, his profound sense of rootlessness. Noguchi indeed spent much of his life in rhythmic passage between Japan and America, the two geographical, psychological and spiritual poles of his existence. Though there is no doubt that in the long run Noguchi was able to mine this condition, to transform it into deeply felt universal perceptions through the particularities of his art, neither is there any question that his bifurcated heritage caused great anguish in this profoundly sentient, creative personality.

He had begun his short, moving 1968 autobiography, *A Sculptor's World*, with the troubling questions, "With my double nationality and double upbringing, where was my home? Where my affections? Where my identity? Japan or America, either, both—or the world?" It was a subject that came up repeatedly in conversation. In Long Island City, a decade before, he had stated tartly, perhaps in response to an unstated question, "I am not a Japanese artist. I am an American." In Mure he confided, "The Japanese think of me as an exotic dabbler in the periphery of things, never getting close to the core. I just ignore it, I'm not aware of it. I'm neither [Japanese nor American], in a sense. I'm an artist." And, surveying his indelibly Japanese surroundings—his house was a 200-year-old samurai dwelling he had rescued from destruction elsewhere and had rebuilt at Mure—he said, "A Japanese would never live like this. It would be thought of as something militaristic. I can do it because I'm not Japanese." Referring to the roots in Zen Buddhism of the samurai warrior's unbending code, he said, "I can see it through art and, in a sense, sanitize it."

For all of his rootlessness, or perhaps because of it, Noguchi made extraordinary efforts to create definable, inimitable

places in which to live and work on opposite points of the globe. The Long Island City warehouses became, of course, the world's pre-eminent Noguchi museum, a typically spartan environment with every piece located just so in relation to walls, windows and other sculptures. Though sprawling and inclusive, the Mure compound was just as purposefully enclosed. The old house, with its dark, stone-paved antechamber, its traditional wooden bath, its tatami rooms, shoji panels, *akari* lamps and secluded garden, was screened by trees and situated across a dirt road from the walled enclosure of the workplace. This wall itself was no mean piece of work. About eight feet high and made of huge "waste" stones, it functioned visually and psychologically very much in the tradition of "borrowed scenery" (*shakkei*), the ancient Japanese gardening principle of appropriating a distant view by blocking out unappealing elements of the middle ground.

The buildings within the enclosure included a traditional farmhouse converted to storage use and a 100-year-old sake factory Noguchi had purchased and moved to his estate. Both were restored to pristine condition according to traditional building practices. Perhaps the most astonishing of the buildings was the house belonging to and built by Masatoshi Izumi, Noguchi's longtime chief stonecutter, with its stone walls and simple truss frame roof. A large, circular black "hole in the doughnut" left over from *Black Sun*, the first major piece Noguchi and Izumi had fashioned at Shikoku, served as an elegant if improbable column top.

The hill behind Noguchi's house featured a stone-covered platform for a huge, skull-like gray stone—a chilling but funny piece—and a tumbling spillway of giant waste boulders. It served as an impressive laboratory for Noguchi's earth-moving endeavors, and perhaps was something of a model for the mound supporting *Momo Taro* at Storm King, in upstate New York, one of Noguchi's greatest works.

Noguchi's routine at Shikoku was rigorous. Every move revolved around the artist. The housekeeper would have meals ready—an American cereal for breakfast (his only non-Japanese meal of the day) and fresh local fish and vegetables—and, in the yard, the craftsmen awaited his instructions. The basic workforce consisted of three men: Izumi; his son, who Noguchi said had quit school a decade earlier to work with his father; and a fisherman who had ceased fishing 10 years before and who, Noguchi stated, was "very good and as strong as an ox." Strength, skill and assiduous attention to the sculptor's imperatives were necessary qualifications for work in the yard. Early on Monday morning, the whole team was busily engaged, using power equipment to shift giant stone sculptures, each quite beautiful but clearly unfinished in the sculptor's eyes. Communication practically wordless; response immediate. The boulders were moved almost as if they were so many pebbles.

Later, I watched as the artist literally ran from building to building to supervise and participate in the cutting and polishing and hammering of the great stones. Though genuinely informative—inspiring, even—the unintended game of tag was amusing, too. Clearly the time of my visit was over. The intensity of his concentration was palpable. I was reminded of what sculptor Nizette Brennan had said years before, after working for extended periods with Noguchi at the quarries in Pietrasanta, Italy. Of all the artists she'd seen there, Brennan said, "Noguchi was the only one who worked as if his life depended on it." ■

Benjamin Forgey, architecture critic for the Washington Post, was in Japan during 1985-86 on a Fulbright fellowship.

