

Tatami and Wood: Ink Rubbings and the Discussion of Materiality in Postwar Japanese Calligraphy and Art

Introduction

In the decades after the Second World War, many artists internationally allowed their productive materials—and the limitations these materials imposed—to take control of the fashioning of their artistic messages. Creatively exploring the physical aspects of art and its making, they sought to minimize or even question human agency in relation to natural expression, thus identifying materiality as their main concern. In the United States, Jackson Pollock gave enamel a way to reveal itself through dripping, and the European Art Informel focused on the expressivity of “the material itself[, which] embodies an encounter with reality.” (Fineberg 1995, 150-152) (Comment 1)

While the preoccupation with materiality is widely recognized in the literature on postwar abstract art, its international underpinnings and trajectories demand further study. Although often overlooked today, Japanese calligraphy made a significant impact on postwar art, including the discourse of materiality, both in Japan and abroad. In the 1950s and '60s the works of Japanese calligraphers, such as Morita Shiryū (1912-1998), Hidai Nankoku (1912-1999), or Teshima Yūkei (1901-1987), could be seen exhibited alongside abstract painting in many prestigious international art venues, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1955), Documenta in Kassel (1959), and the San Paolo Biennale (1957, 1959, and 1961). The fact that the work of many postwar painters is often compared to calligraphy is hardly a coincidence. It springs from Japanese calligraphy's unprecedented visibility in international art at the time, reinforced by the calligraphers' active efforts to explore the links between calligraphy and modern art, and to communicate their views, theories, and visual practices to the world. (Comment 16)

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3 The purpose of this paper is to examine the avant-garde calligraphers' contribution to the postwar
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5 discourse of materiality in the international abstract art scene. Its focus is on how Japanese
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7 calligraphers introduced the dimension of spirituality (*seishinsei*) into the postwar conception of
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9 materiality, making the international art world perceive these two categories as no longer standing
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11 in opposition, but as complementary and even inseparably intertwined.
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15 In particular, this paper will examine the Japanese calligraphers' revival of the medium of *takuhon* ink
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17 rubbings, which offered a fascinating arena for the postwar debate among Japanese calligraphers
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19 and international abstract artists about the meaning of materiality. Ink rubbings, a form of artistic
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21 production defined by the intense physical contact with the material (comment 1a), emerged as an
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23 accidental point of convergence between Sino-Japanese calligraphy and European abstract art in the
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25 mid-twentieth century. Long familiar to Sino-Japanese calligraphers as a traditional method for
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27 copying engraved inscriptions, the technique was also independently introduced by Max Ernst in the
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29 1920s as a way to insert automatic surrealist procedures into painting. Later, in the 1950s, Japanese
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31 avant-garde calligraphers such as Inoue Yūichi (1916-1985) and abstract painters such as Hasegawa
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33 Saburō (1906-1957) (comment 20) began to incorporate *takuhon* ink rubbings into their active art
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35 practice. This study will argue that when these two very different conceptions and interpretations of
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37 the technically identical medium of ink rubbing encountered each other, the meeting triggered a
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39 renegotiation of materiality by both sides. (comments 1b and 5)
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46 While some studies have examined *takuhon* rubbings in the context of East Asian art history, most of
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48 these have been concerned with conducting an archeological or archival inquiry into the history of
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50 ancient calligraphy or into the interaction between Japanese and Chinese calligraphies (Brown 2011,
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52 Ruitenbeek 2002, Ledderose 1981, etc.). Similarly, scholars of European art history have restricted
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54 their study of the *frottage* rubbing technique to the context of surrealist art, overlooking the
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3 existence of its East Asian parallel and its implications for the development of the concept of
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5 materiality in international postwar art (Spies 1968, Legge 1993, Stoullig and Comment 2001, Welsch
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7 1974, etc.). This is, therefore, the first work to scrutinize the encounter between these two rubbing
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9 lineages and its implications for postwar art.
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12 This paper will argue that the Japanese avant-garde calligraphers first began working with the
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14 medium of ink rubbings in response to the growing international interest in materiality. Their work
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16 stimulated a new interest in *takuhon*—and a new awareness of its similarity to the surrealist *frottage*
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18 technique—that altered the international dialogue about the materiality in art. (comment 4) As a
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20 result of this encounter, the postwar rendering of materiality shifted from the automatism-
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22 dominated rhetoric of surrealism to the more spiritually and philosophically inclined interpretations
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24 that this study will argue originated from the Sino-Japanese calligraphic tradition of interpreting and
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26 appreciating *takuhon* rubbings.
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31 By redirecting popular interpretations of ink rubbing from automatism to spirituality, Japanese
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33 calligraphic theories and modern calligraphic practices reshaped the international understanding of
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35 the role of materiality in art. The calligraphers' notion of "spirituality" or *seishinsei* of art, here, refers
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37 to the focus on philosophical and metaphysical aspects of art production, detached from its physical
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39 qualities. (comment 3d) In many respects, this focus played along with the expectation of foreign
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41 audiences to seek spiritual insights in Japanese art—a view developed by an entire generation of
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43 prominent Meiji art historians, getting only stronger in the prelude of the unfolding postwar
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45 intellectual fashion for Zen in the United States and Europe. However, while the Japanese
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47 calligraphers creatively drew on this expectation to promote their art, their contribution is not
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49 merely due to their cultural origin, which they shared with painters and other artists from Japan.
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3 Only by being *calligraphers*, people of the letters, would they be able to spotlight the intimate
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5 connection between the material and its inherent spirituality to the world. (comment 2)
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8 ***Takuhon* Ink Rubbings with a Modern Twist**

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11 Ink rubbings have long held a special place in the history of Japanese art and, in particular, in the
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13 history of Japanese calligraphy. Ever the preferred technique for copying calligraphic inscriptions in
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15 China, *takuhon* was introduced into Japan in much the same way as many other classical calligraphic
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17 techniques and concepts. Technically, a *takuhon* rubbing is an imprint made by pressing a sheet of
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19 paper over the text or image engraved on an ink-covered stone. The process of rubbing ink on the
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21 stone that carried the usually ancient calligraphic inscriptions quite naturally interacted with the
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23 spirituality (*seishensei*) of art, which focuses on the deeply philosophical and metaphysical
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25 calligraphic content of the rubbed sutra texts or poetry. (comment 3d) The complex relationship
26
27 between stone, ink, paper, and the imprint of the simulated brushwork engraved on the stone,
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29 inspired modern calligraphers and other artists to explore their creative relationship to these
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31 materials and to materiality itself.
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37 In postwar Japan, the renewed attention to ink rubbings had distinctly antiquarian implications. The
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39 practice of making ink rubbings was less widespread in Japan than in China, its country of origin.
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41 Rubbings from the stone stelaе scattered all over that vast country were collected, circulated, and
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43 closely studied by aficionados of antiquities. Self-seclusion during the Edo period prevented Japan
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45 from participating in this process, and Japan's sudden exposure to a large quantity of rubbings after
46
47 the country's reopening in the Meiji period caused a shock among Japanese calligraphers. Numerous
48
49 ink rubbings, brought to Japan in a suitcase by a Chinese diplomat and antiquarian Yang Shoujing
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51 (1839-1915), triggered a transformative shift in the perception of calligraphy and its visual legacy in
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53 Japan. (comment 14) Seeing—and touching—the traces of calligraphic history imprinted in these
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3 rubbings motivated Japanese calligraphers to adjust their current theories and practices to this new
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6 knowledge (Ōno 2011, 37). As paradoxical as it may sound, a deep and renewed interest in
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8 antiquarianism was thus the first step towards the subsequent modernization of Japanese
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10 calligraphy. As Shana J. Brown observes, Sino-Japanese antiquarianism, with its shared discourse of
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12 appreciation for antiquities and ancient texts, had a “distinctly modern valency” (Brown 2012, 70).

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15 The majority of postwar avant-garde calligraphers studied calligraphy from a generation of artists
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17 who had directly experienced and participated in the influx of rubbings from China in the Meiji
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19 period, some of them learning directly from Yang Shoujing during his stay in Japan. Teachers of the
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21 future avant-gardists, such as Kusakabe Meikaku (1838-1922) and Hidai Tenrai (1872-1939), advised
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23 their students that rubbings offered an unprecedented “opportunity...to express greater
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25 individualism and creativity” (Brown 2012, 81-83). The reverberations of the stele rubbings boom
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27 could be clearly sensed in postwar years. Ulfert Wilke (1907-87) (1958, 56), a calligraphy-inspired
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29 German-American abstract expressionist, transcribed a conversation he had with avant-garde
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31 calligrapher Hidai Nankoku around 1958:

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36 Nankoku Hidai, one of them whom I visited in his Yokohama home, gave me many
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38 hours of the most absorbing information. [...] Having the largest collection of stone
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40 rubbings in Japan, he illustrated his thoughts about calligraphic development by
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42 fabulous stone-rubbings and books.
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46 As conservative as Hidai may appear to be from Wilke's letter, he was the first Japanese calligrapher
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48 to start making abstract calligraphy toward the end of the 1940s. No matter how innovative and
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50 revolutionary the postwar calligraphers were, they typically stayed true to the teachings of their
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52 masters and believed in the transformative power of antiquities. (comment 12)
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3 A close study of ancient calligraphic sources—including the translation of stone-rubbings into the
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5 language of black ink on white paper—was an important component of the avant-gardists' training.
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7 The *Study of the Ancient Sources* (*Koten kenkyū*), for instance, was a permanent section in the avant-
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9 garde calligraphy journal *Bokujin* from its first issue. This and other journals often proudly featured
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11 *takuhon* reproductions on their covers (Fig. 1). For postwar calligraphers, imprints from ancient
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13 engravings secured their connection to tradition and allowed for experiments. The Japanese avant-
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15 garde calligrapher Ueda Sōkyū (1899-1968) (1963, 170) describes his emotions upon observing an
16
17 ancient *takuhon* rubbing:

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22 In old rubbings the ink color is faded, which gives them a special subdued, hazy
23
24 feeling. They are so fine that they involuntarily fascinate. White characters
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26 surrounded by such ink produce a different kind of elegance. There are often a lot of
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28 cracked signs and damaged text fragments that differ from the original form, and
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30 imagining what the original might have looked like is immensely captivating.

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33 (comment 8)

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36 Ueda and many other calligraphers of the postwar generation perceived rubbings as a conversation
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38 with the ancient masters. The voices of these masters, recorded in the stone and paper of the
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40 *takuhon*, were often distorted by the material damages inflicted by the passage of time. Yet, just as
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42 the scratches on gramophone records can make a melody even more captivating, these material
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44 imperfections gave the ancient rubbings a special aura, solemn yet nostalgic, as if making the very
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46 passage of time palpable. Engaging with the old rubbings inspired Ueda and his contemporaries to
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48 think creatively about the past, imagine the original forms of the inscriptions, and develop a dialogue
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50 with them.
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3 Calligraphers cherished the idea that the past could talk to them through rubbings, and their
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5 attention to the materiality of *takuhon* helped them to interrogate their own history and culture.
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7 Postwar calligraphers thus regarded rubbings not merely as a copying technique, but as a medium of
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9 modernity itself. This fascination with “listening to material” was not, however, limited to Japan. A
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11 whimsical coincidence taking place on the other side of the world soon made it easier for Japanese
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13 calligraphers to introduce ink rubbings into the larger world of modern art and to participate in the
14
15 international discussion of materiality.
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18 19 20 **Part I. Rubbing the Wooden Floor of a Hotel Room**

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22 In 1926, a German artist Max Ernst invented a technique of automatism which he named *frottage*.
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24 Arising quite independent of the stone-rubbing boom in the world of Japanese calligraphy, and
25
26 inspired by Breton's Surrealist manifesto, *frottage* was, in its technical aspect, identical to the
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28 calligraphers' *takuhon* rubbings. In an oft-quoted passage, Ernst describes his discovery of the
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30 *frottage* technique:
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34 I was struck by the obsessive effect of the floor, whose ruts had been deepened by a
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36 thousand washings, on my exacerbated gaze. I decided to probe the symbolism of
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38 this obsession and, in order to help my meditative and hallucinative faculties, I made
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40 from the boards a series of drawings, randomly placing on them sheets of paper
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42 which I then started rubbing with graphite (quoted in Stoullig and Comment 2001, 7).
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46 For Ernst, this focus on materiality opened a door to the unconscious—and, incidentally, turned a
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48 new page in the history of surrealist art. (comment 6) A sustained focus on the actuality of the
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50 “material” could allow an artist to transcend the tyranny of the human mind and spirit, with all their
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52 social conventions, and relate to nature directly, embracing its actuality. Observing the autonomous
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3 patterns that appeared in the material without his artistic intention—and pursuing the associations
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5 they freely triggered—could afford the artist a glimpse into himself. Inspired by the visual appeal of
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7 various textures, Ernst started to “question [...] all sorts of materials to be found in my visual field:
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9 leaves and their veins, the ragged edges of a bit of linen, the brushstrokes of a “modern” painting,
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11 the unwound thread from a spool, etc.” (Ernst 1936, reprinted in Ernst and Motherwell 1948, 7). Max
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13 Ernst self-consciously regarded himself not as a creator of his *frottages*, but, as he stressed in his
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15 later programmatic text “Beyond Painting” (1936), as a spectator assisting at the birth of works
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17 created by the “mind’s hallucinatory faculties.” Meditating on the random patterns of the objects
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19 around him opened a pathway into the surrealist world. For Ernst, materiality was a way to escape
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21 the intentionality of the human spirit, a fight with the culture in which high art was produced, and a
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23 means to deconstruct the artistic ideologies inherent in it. According to Ernst, his *frottages*
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25 “contributed to the general overthrow of those values which, in our time, have been considered the
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27 most established and secure”, most importantly by “terrifying the art critics” to “see the importance
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29 of the ‘author’ being reduced to the minimum and [the] conception of ‘talent’ abolished.” (Ibid., 11
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31 and 25). (comment 10a)

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33 By bringing trivial everyday objects into the picture, allegedly (comment 10d) without altering them
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35 through painterly depiction, Ernst unsettled the hierarchy of art objects. He eliminated from the act
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37 of artistic creation “all conscious mental guidance (of reason, taste, morals), reducing to the
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39 extreme the active part of that one whom we called, up to now, the ‘author’ of the work.” (Ibid., 8).
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41 Nevertheless, his *frottages* were triggered less by his interest in the materials he studied, than by his
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43 interest in his own reactions and associations to them. As Ernst writes, “the drawings thus obtained
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45 lost more and more [...] the character of the material interrogated (the wood, for example) and
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3 took on the aspect of images of an unhop-ed-for precision, probably of a sort which revealed the first
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5 cause of the obsession, or produced a simulacrum of that cause." (Ibid.) (comment 10c)
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9 The way Max Ernst chose to visually represent this idea can be seen in his *Mauerschleicher* (or *Rasant*
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11 *les Murs*) (Fig. 2). This phantasmagorical image, drawn from his *Natural History* series, expresses his
12
13 ironic fascination with the scientific ambition to taxonomize nature. In his *Mauerschleicher*, rubbings
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15 from dry leaves are placed atop a rubbing of wooden boards, as if to simulate a bush peeking out
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17 over a fence. Surprisingly, these rubbed objects carry more factual conviction than a painting; unlike
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19 a naturalistic image, they are not a well-constructed optical illusion, but tangible traces on paper
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21 offering physical evidence of the existence of real objects. The kaleidoscopic rubbed shadows offer a
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23 mimetic depiction of unrelated, yet fully real—even hyperreal—objects. The almost architectural
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25 composition is accompanied by a microscopic attention to the texture of the materials, which
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27 thereby liberate themselves from the composition and start interacting with and even challenging it,
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29 as if setting up a tension between the natural objects and calling into question any human plans for
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31 them. (comment 10b)
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37 Mesmerized by textural expressivity and enthusiastically exploring the ways in which imprinted
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39 images trigger phantasy and association, Ernst uses the materiality of rubbed objects in his work to
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41 develop a dialogue between himself and his subconscious. Quite apart from the interpretative
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43 meanings that he inserted into his *frottages*, the technique he developed is highly suggestive. It
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45 involved a monotype-like process in which an image was obtained by rubbing a piece of charcoal,
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47 chalk, or other dry pigments on paper laid over a textural or relief surface. This technical detail is
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49 significant. While in traditional Sino-Japanese practice ink rubbings were made by applying wet ink to
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51 a carved surface before making a paper imprint, in the twentieth century, when artists started
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53 making imprints from precious ancient bronze vessels, fragile wooden objects, and other delicate
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3 antiquities, the conventional technique of wet rubbing (*shittaku*) was replaced by the technique of
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6 dry rubbing (*kantaku*) (Kobashi 1955, 24). Although developed independently, this technique was
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8 identical to the one Max Ernst used. This coincidence served as one more link helping Japanese
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10 artists to embrace the new conception of ink rubbings initiated by the work of Ernst and, later, Henri
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12 Michaux.

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16 Ernst's new ideas and views on materiality in rubbings were introduced to a Japanese audience by
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18 Japanese surrealist painters, in particular by Fukuzawa Ichirō (1898-1992), who lived in Paris in the
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20 late 1920s. Fukuzawa, an aficionado of Ernst's work, made an important contribution to raising
21
22 awareness in Japan about Ernst and surrealist art. Eight years after returning to Tokyo from Paris, he
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24 published a book, *Ernst* (1939), that summarized the most important concepts and ideas developed
25
26 by this surrealist painter. This book also contained a detailed description of the *frottage* technique
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28 from the perspective of a surrealist, introducing it to Japanese art circles for the first time (Fukuzawa
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30 1939, 7-9, 15-16). Fukuzawa did not, however, use *frottage* widely in his own works, but focused on
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32 other visual modes.
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37 The first experiments with surrealist ink rubbings in modern Japanese art were undertaken by
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39 Hasegawa Saburō, who approached it from the standpoint of abstract painting. An active abstract
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41 artist with broad international experience and a large network, Hasegawa was also an art historian,
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43 with expertise in classical Japanese art, ink painting, Zen philosophy, and the tea ceremony, as well
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45 as a prominent art theorist and exponent of modern European and American art. These multifaceted
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47 talents helped Hasegawa to recognize in the medium of ink rubbings a great potential for
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49 modernizing Japanese calligraphy, as well as for initiating a transcultural dialogue in abstract art. In
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51 two article series, "East and West in Arts" and "New West and Old Japan" (Hasegawa and Inui 1977,
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53 vol. Ron, 85-99), he sought to show that the ancient classics of Sino-Japanese art contained clues to
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3 trends in contemporary art and could serve as guidance for modern Japanese and international
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5 artists. His deep-seated conviction was that “Classics (*koten*) is already avant-garde art” and that
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7 “Classics belongs to us, avant-garde artists,” a view he represented in his art works by using ink
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10 rubbings as a medium to visualize this idea. (Hasegawa 1940, reprinted in SCAM 1988, 125) (comment

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15 Hasegawa's preoccupation with rubbings had several points of origin. The original incentive was
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17 provided, most likely, by Fukuzawa Ichirō. Active in surrealist circles and a denizen of Paris in the late
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19 1920s, Hasegawa was thoroughly familiar with Fukuzawa and, keenly aware of the latest trends in
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21 art, must have noticed Fukuzawa's appreciation of Ernst and his *frottages*.
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25 In addition, Hasegawa's contact with *sōsaku hanga* print artists, in particular with Uchima Ansei (1921-
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27 2000), turned out to be very fruitful. Hasegawa met Uchima when Hasegawa was accompanying
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29 prominent sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), for whom Uchima served as a translator, on his
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31 survey of Japanese culture in the early 1950s. (Inui 1988, 137) In his travels and conversations with
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33 Noguchi and Uchima, both of whom were American artists of Japanese descent, Hasegawa learned
34
35 about the new international (in particular American) art, but also about innovations in Japanese
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37 printmaking, which was one of the most internationally successful and dynamic spheres of Japanese
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39 arts in early postwar years. Inspired by Uchima, Hasegawa started experimenting with various types
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41 of prints, including monotype prints and prints from unusual materials such as the *kamaboko* boards
42
43 used for producing fish paste. During this time, Hasegawa radically changed the materials that
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45 dominated his works, almost fully replacing oil painting with ink, Japanese paper, and various print
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47 types, and thereby approaching the medium of rubbings. (comment 18)
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3 Deeply committed to traditional Japanese art, unlike many other modernists, Hasegawa was
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5 convinced that “calligraphy [...] is modern 'abstract' painting.” (Hasegawa 1959, reprinted in HPMMMA
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7 1977, 9) Attentive to developments in modern Japanese calligraphy, he carefully considered not only
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9 the surrealist implications of rubbings, but also the antiquarian connotations *takuhon* held among
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11 calligraphers. Furthermore, from the early 1950s he started collaborating with avant-garde
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13 calligraphers of the Bokujinkai group, regularly reviewed their works, and contributed theoretical
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15 articles to calligraphic journals such as *Bokubi* and *Sho-no-Bi*, bringing the worlds of modernist
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17 painting and Japanese calligraphy closer to each other.
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22 In 1951 and 1952 Hasegawa started producing works that revealed the possibilities offered by the
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24 medium of ink rubbings in contemporary abstract art. His experiments started by taking rubbings
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26 from various evocative surfaces, such as the rough timber of the abandoned fishermen's boats he
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28 stumbled upon on the seashore close to his house. These he organized in a large composition
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30 entitled *Rhapsody: Fishing Village*, which in 1952 toured the United States and on which American
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32 critics enthusiastically commented that “its grained patterns are beautifully achieved and beautifully
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34 related, and the whole is as subtle as it is ingenious” (Frankenstein 1952, quoted in Johnson 2005,
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36 190). Further, Hasegawa experimented with rubbings from fallen pine trees, which he again found
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38 close to his home, as well as with more trivial everyday objects, such as washboards (Johnson 2005,
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40 205). Other objects of his interest were more historically loaded, and included rubbings from old
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42 architectural monuments, for example, Katsura Imperial Villa, which he visited together with
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44 Noguchi. On this occasion, Noguchi commented that: “When I became interested in looking at these
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46 temples, we [Noguchi and Hasegawa] went around making rubbings.” (Noguchi 1973) Altogether,
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48 during 1951 and 1952 Hasegawa Saburō created several dozens of artworks based on *takuhon*
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50 rubbings, either as the only medium, or in combination with other techniques. (comments 18 and 9)
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3 Besides Hasegawa's attention to the abstract patterns of texture, his attempts to give this texture a
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6 recognizably cultural embedding must be understood within the framework of his lifelong ambition
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8 to connect methods of modernist painting with East Asian philosophy. (comment 9) Starting from
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10 1952, Hasegawa included ancient Sino-Japanese characters in many of his *takuhon*, often treating the
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12 ink rubbings of ancient characters as timeless natural monuments. In *Nature* (Fig. 3), a representative
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14 work from this period, Hasegawa places the character 幽 (*yū*, "dark, otherworldly, confined") in the
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16 midst of rubbings of wood and stone, treating the character as a phenomenon as natural as trees
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18 and rocks, and at least as ancient. In this work culture and nature mingle, with the Sino-Japanese
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20 ideogram being represented as a script inherent in nature itself, almost like a prehistoric leaf or
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22 insect that preserved its original, fossilized form through centuries. Hasegawa's intention to mystify
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24 Japanese writing is indicated by his choice of the character *yū*, "dark and otherworldly," which
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26 shows the artist's aspiration to link the natural, mystical, and most ancient aspects of Japanese art
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28 and culture.
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34 Hasegawa's pursuit of the mystical is paralleled only by his fascination with the materiality of the
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36 rubbed objects. Choosing materials with different textures, he observes how the variously patterned
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38 rubbings they create interact. As Ueda Sōkyū later observed, "The sense of inkiness in *takuhon*
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40 rubbings, when wood or stone texture clearly surface, creates an absolutely special atmosphere"
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42 (Ueda 1963, 170). In *Nature*, the rough and heavily grained texture of granite is contrasted with the
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44 soft and wrinkled surface of a wood block cut across the grain. Annual rings with their circular
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46 structure protrude on the wood surface. These ridges organize the entire composition, holding it
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48 together with a centripetal force, while the granite stone plays the role of dark matter, an antipole
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50 acting upon the other elements with its gravity. Wood and stone here are like two competing
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52 powers: The warm, well-organized, circular wood texture evokes the orderliness of life while the
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3 rough, dark, cold and intensely grained stone hints at lifeless chaos. Yet the two also intermingle.
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5 Taoist concepts of *yin* and *yang* are in play here as well, since Hasegawa, who regularly mentioned
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7 Taoism and Zen in his theoretical works on art throughout his career, was around this time explicitly
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9 addressing Taoist topics in his other works as well. (comment 9) Taoism offered Hasegawa a richly
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11 elaborated traditional framework for conceptualizing the significance of various materials and for
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13 imbuing them with specific metaphysical characteristics (Fowler 2005, 84-94). Materiality thus
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15 became the ultimate content of the work, with meaning emerging from the patterns of the rubbings
16
17 themselves, rather than from the author's subconscious, as Ernst had suggested. As Inui Yoshiaki
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19 (1988, 138) commented, Hasegawa's rubbings "remind of *frottages* by Max Ernst, yet while the
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21 nervous tactility of the wood grain in works of this dadaist artist visualize concealed consciousness
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23 (*ishiki*) and desires, Hasegawa plainly imprints the complex and rational beauty created by the nature
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25 in wood." Hasegawa's rubbings are communicating with nature, via the visual code of Taoism and
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27 other traditional philosophical systems, without trying to overthrow them. (comment 18)
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37 Part II. Rubbing the Worn Tatami Mat of a Living Room

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39 Inspired and transformed by its contacts with surrealism, the new *takuhon* ink rubbing soon found its
40
41 way back into the realm of traditional calligraphy, where it was promoted by Hasegawa himself and
42
43 by members of the Bokujinkai avant-garde calligraphy group, in particular Inoue Yūichi, who was a
44
45 founding member of the group. Befriended by Hasegawa, Inoue, who had aspired from childhood to
46
47 be an oil painter, was a frequent guest in Hasegawa's house. For Inoue, (comment 21) Hasegawa
48
49 represented a childhood dream: a modern painter who had graduated from Tokyo University
50
51 (comment 22) and had studied in Paris, and who knew many influential artists worldwide. In his
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2
3 diary, Inoue Yūichi refers to Hasegawa as “a teacher I shall look up to for all my life” (quoted in
4
5 Unagami 2009, 99). Communicating with Hasegawa helped Inoue erase the boundaries between his
6
7 calligraphic endeavors and those of contemporary art, convincing him of the universal relevance of
8
9 calligraphy. Inoue's original interest in calligraphy arose from his fascination with oil painting, which
10
11 made him a perfect recipient for Hasegawa's ideas. Like Hasegawa, he started experimenting with
12
13 ink rubbings in the early 1950s. Having learned from his master about Ernst's *frottages*, Inoue created
14
15 his *takuhon* works fully aware of their possibly surrealist associations. Yet, as an avant-garde
16
17 calligrapher, he was also trained to perceive *takuhon* ink rubbings as ancient artifacts and as a means
18
19 to connect with and revive calligraphy's rich and multifaceted history. (comment 7) Thus, the relation
20
21 between matter and spirit in Inoue's works differs not only from Ernst, but also from Hasegawa.
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26
27 Somethirty years after Max Ernst invented *frottage*, Inoue Yūichi also got inspired by the pattern of
28
29 his floor. Like Ernst, he too decided to take a rubbing from it and incorporate it into his art. But
30
31 Inoue's rubbing was inspired by entirely different emotions and intentions—as well as by a different
32
33 kind of floor. In 1952 Inoue Yūichi (1952, 133) wrote:

34
35
36
37 It has been three years since we moved into the separate rented house where we
38
39 now live. Every year we do a big cleaning, but we never actually clean under the
40
41 tatami, even though we know it's not hygienic [to neglect it]. That's because we're
42
43 lazy, of course, but also because our tatami might fall apart if we start moving it
44
45 around. So I decided to take a rubbing from our threadbare tatami and to combine it
46
47 with the cut-outs of characters written by my children.
48
49

50
51 The walls in the house are covered with scribbles left by the family who lived here
52
53 before us. One scratched sentimental *tanka* poem makes me smile bitterly every time
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1
2
3 I see it. The things scrawled by the children—both writings and pictures—are
4
5
6 outstanding. So I took rubbings from these scribbles too, whenever suitable.
7

8
9 In 1952 Inoue produced a series of calligraphic rubbings that feature a rubbed tatami pattern as their
10
11 background. By rubbing the tatami floor, he enters into a conversation both with his own family and
12
13 with the family that lived in the house before them. Working with the worn tatami is akin to talking
14
15 to the generations of people who grew up and left their traces in the house—a way of showing
16
17 respect for the object while drawing attention to its implications through a conversation the artist
18
19 has not just with himself, as in the case of Ernst, but with other people's personal histories. Just as
20
21 making *takuhon* rubbings from famous stele engravings is a gesture of admiration for the
22
23 calligraphers whose handwriting is engraved thereon, Inoue's tatami rubbing venerates the family
24
25 histories of previous inhabitants who lived with the tatami. Inoue is in a dialogue with human
26
27 emotion and spirit, rather than trying to escape it by pursuing matter.
28
29

30
31 Unlike Ernst, Inoue doesn't focus on matter in the inner-directed hope of hearing his own
32
33 subconscious, but looks at objects in order to unravel their stories and hear their voices. As in Arjun
34
35 Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things*, objects are not just indifferent parts of an external reality;
36
37 instead, they have their own stories to tell and emotions to share. They link past and present,
38
39 connect people with each other, enable an emotional dialogue with the previous renters of his house
40
41 whom he has never met, and create an empathic bond between their children. Looking at the tatami,
42
43 Inoue thinks of the many people who have sat on it—the generations of families whose traces he
44
45 can detect there, as well as the stories of his own children now imprinted in the mat; by rubbing the
46
47 tatami, he gives the mat a voice. This intention is quite different from that of Ernst, who saw in the
48
49 hotel floor only abstract patterns and disconnected images, not the traces of the hundreds of the
50
51 hotel guests who had walked on it before him. For Inoue, matter isn't a way to avoid the promptings
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2
3 of spirit; it contains spirit in the sense that it is embedded with the immaterial life stories of the
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5
6 people who have come into contact with it. (comments 3d and 13) Materials are deeply imprinted
7
8 with the culture in which they exist, and the spirit they have absorbed can be revealed through
9
10 rubbings.

11
12
13 In the early 1950s, Inoue continued to create works that incorporated increasingly complicated
14
15 relations of materialities, techniques, and genres. At the end of 1951 and into 1952 he experimented
16
17 with different types of rubbings, scripts, and materials, creating a series of rubbings that
18
19 incorporated the modern Japanese poetry of Ozaki Hōsai (1889-1926) and Anzai Fuyue (1898-1965),
20
21 as well as classical Chinese poetry by Tao Yuanming (365-427) and Chen Yuyi (1091-1139). One of the
22
23 rubbings based on Anzai's poetry was even selected for exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in
24
25 New York. (Inoue and Unagami 1996, vol. 1, 642-643) (comments 4 and 19) These works, such as
26
27 *Many Frogs* from 1952, are hard to recognize as calligraphy, so squarely do they focus on the various
28
29 materials composing them (Fig. 4). A medley of classical ink-on-paper calligraphy, rubbings, and
30
31 collage, Inoue's *Many Frogs* features a haiku poem by Ozaki Hōsai, who was an important inspiration
32
33 for him at this point.

34
35
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38
39 The haiku reads as follows:

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41
42 蛙たくさん鳴かせ灯を消して寝る

43
44
45 Letting a frog choir croak, I turn off the light and sleep.

46
47
48 With its rubbings from tatami mats, both tattered and intact, affixed with scraps of newspapers, the
49
50 work renders the atmosphere of a cozy spring evening at home. It evokes mood of the artist lying on
51
52 a tatami floor, reading the newspaper and listening to the frogs singing outside the window. In it,
53
54 Inoue stimulates all the senses: sight, by showing calligraphy and newspapers; hearing, by alluding to
55

1
2
3 frogs croaking; and touch, by showing the texture of the rugged tatami floor, sweet with dried
4
5 grasses, that leaves imprints on skin just as it does on paper. For Inoue, calligraphy was a multimedia
6
7 effort that combined traditional ink writing, surrealist *frottage*, and modernist collage, more freely
8
9 than calligraphers had ever before dared. His work transcends the formal boundaries that divide
10
11 poetry from calligraphy, and calligraphy from painting, restoring to calligraphy the threefold unity of
12
13 premodern literary art. By fusing all the means available to him, he achieves a unified artistic effect
14
15 that conveys his state of mind on that quiet, warm spring night.
16
17

18
19
20 In Inoue's work, the discourse of materiality, in which *takuhon* delve into the effects that various
21
22 materials create as imprints, acquired the patina of Zen philosophy. After Hasegawa's exploration of
23
24 the mystical Taoist meanings of various materials, Inoue began to include Buddhist subjects in the
25
26 visual dialogue between material and philosophy. His *Mu* ("Nothingness," 1952) is a rubbing from the
27
28 script in an oracle-bone style (Fig. 5). Inoue self-consciously decides to use this most ancient form of
29
30 the Sino-Japanese script in combination with the *takuhon* rubbing technique:
31
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34
35 Oracle-bone script was [originally] carved with a knife... When the oracle-bone script
36
37 is written with a brush, I am not convinced by it. I find it boring to render the feeling
38
39 of a carved line with a brush. You have to carve it (Inoue 1960, quoted in Unagami
40
41 1996, 232).
42
43

44
45 Inoue Yūichi experimented with stone carving and ink rubbing in the belief that these techniques are
46
47 the most suitable for rendering the character of oracle-bone script. The intense materiality of the
48
49 work reflects one crucial respect in which Inoue's postwar appropriation of the medium of *takuhon*
50
51 differs from traditional *takuhon* rubbings. In conventional *takuhon* rubbings (as in woodblock prints),
52
53 the final image was the product of a collaboration between several craftsmen. The interactive
54

1
2
3 distribution of labor allowed for a more advanced execution, as evidenced by the technical virtuosity
4
5 of many ancient ink rubbings, which devotedly reproduce even the smallest movements of inked
6
7 brush over stone. The interactions between the artists involved in such production, and their artistic
8
9 hierarchies, technical competitions, mutual inspiration, and economic rivalry, offer a rich field for
10
11 investigation. But in calligraphy and printmaking of the postwar era, single-authored production was
12
13 given clear preference. The postwar artists were eager to explore the tension between artist and
14
15 material and to discover how the natural material of wood, stone, or paper reacted to being shaped
16
17 by the artist's ideas and actions—and how the material directed the artist's hands and minds in turn.
18
19 To accomplish this, the artists wanted to immerse themselves fully in the physical aspect of art
20
21 production. When one person controls all the stages of production, the artist's perception of the
22
23 materiality of the work is dramatically intensified by his or her repeated physical contact with the
24
25 object.
26
27
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29

30
31 Yet in *Mu*, the spiritual dimension of the work dominates its technical or material characteristics. The
32
33 character “Mu”, which sits at the center of this work, has a shape too archaic to be recognized
34
35 nowadays. It is actually even too archaic to be plausibly linked with Zen Buddhism: The latest-known
36
37 examples of oracle bone inscriptions were made about fifteen centuries prior to the emergence of
38
39 Zen. But quibbles about anachronism aside, Inoue gives an unmistakably Zen twist to the character
40
41 through his use of *takuhon*. His rubbing of the stone engraved with the character “Nothingness” is
42
43 surrounded by the rubbing of a tatami mat. Once again the patterns on the floor have hypnotized
44
45 the artist, much like the “obsessive effect” that the floor “whose ruts had been deepened by a
46
47 thousand washings” had on Max Ernst. But Inoue's floor is not made of wood, and the texture of the
48
49 tatami, rendered complex by its interwoven strands of rice and *igusa* straw, does not directly touch
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1
2
3 the imprint of inscribed stone—instead, the stone is respectfully surrounded by a halo-like empty
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5 space, the manifestation, as it were, of the Nothingness itself.
6
7

8
9 In this work, Inoue Yūichi depicts the spirit present in matter, the nothing at the heart of things. The
10
11 stone's bold but silent utterance announces an aesthetic and spiritual message compatible with the
12
13 artist's Zen views, as if bearing witness to their validity. As elsewhere, Inoue literally projects his view
14
15 onto objects, articulating his ideas in their materiality, instead of using their material to override the
16
17 musings of spirit, as did Ernst. By voicing his ideas through the verbal iconography of the stone,
18
19 Inoue gives them greater authority. At the same time, he debunks Ernst's view that objects exist
20
21 outside of any cultural and social context and can therefore serve as a doorway to liberate our
22
23 subconscious. Inoue Yūichi demonstrates how people project their thoughts and perceptions on the
24
25 materials that surround them; they can only see in the stone what they want to see there, and
26
27 nothing else.
28
29

30 31 32 **Rubbings: Materiality and Spirituality in Postwar Art**

33
34 After these experiments by Inoue and Hasegawa, other Japanese artists started to perceive
35
36 materiality in its relation to spirituality. The calligraphers' conviction about the primacy of the
37
38 spiritual over the material had proved contagious. The calligraphers had used the example of
39
40 *takuhon/frottage* rubbings to show that the material cannot be extricated from the spiritual, and that
41
42 the independent objectivity of the material is an illusion. The voice of the material is not the voice of
43
44 nature itself, but the voice of the eyes through which the objects are seen and of the culture in which
45
46 they are embedded; they can only echo it. From this time on, claims about the neutrality and
47
48 objectivity of automatism no longer seemed viable, and the avant-garde calligraphers pointed the
49
50 discussion of materiality in the direction of spirituality (*seishinsei*).
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3 These developments came as a surprise to many contemporary artists in Japan for whom the
4
5 *frottage* technique of Ernst was more familiar than that of calligraphic *takuhon* rubbing. The
6
7 Japanese avant-garde printmakers were surprised to realize that “the old-fashioned thing long-
8
9 known as *takuhon* rubbing is nothing other than the *frottage* that Max Ernst talks about” (Kobashi
10
11 1955, 24). Print artist Kobashi Yasuhide pointed out the surrealist implication of texture in the
12
13 rubbings: “Ernst and others derived from the texture an index that pointed to surrealism, and gave
14
15 new life to the *takuhon* technique by making it inseparable from the natural object” (Kobashi 1955,
16
17 25). The printmakers who started working with the rubbing technique around this time, among them
18
19 Onchi Kōshirō and Yamaguchi Gen, appreciated the technique’s connection to both surrealist
20
21 *frottage* and traditional *takuhon*, and allowed this dual lineage to complicate the relationship
22
23 between the material and the conceptual in their works: They incorporated Ernst-inspired images of
24
25 rubbed wood and plants together with objects that resembled ancient stelae and inscriptions from
26
27 sacred artifacts, giving their works evocative titles like *Ancient People* (Yoshida Hodaka, 1956), *All*
28
29 *Things Used to Live There* (Shinagawa Takumi, 1957), and *History* (Yoshida Tōshi, 1960) (NWAM 1992,
30
31 34, 73, 77). (comment 15)

32
33
34 Among abstract painters, the notion of materiality was coupled, from now on, with the dimension of
35
36 spirituality. In their 1956 manifesto, the famous group Gutai articulated precisely this idea: that spirit
37
38 and matter shall not be seen as a contradiction, but as mutually complementary dimensions of the
39
40 real:

41
42
43 In Gutai Art, the human spirit and matter shake hands with each other while keeping
44
45 their distance. Matter never compromises itself with the spirit; the spirit never
46
47 dominates matter. When matter remains intact and exposes its characteristics, it
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49
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1
2
3 starts telling a story and even cries out. To make the fullest use of matter is to make
4
5 use of the spirit. By enhancing the spirit, matter is brought to the height of spirit. [...]

6
7
8
9 Gutai aspires to present exhibitions filled with vibrant spirit, exhibitions in which an
10
11 intense cry accompanies the discovery of the new life of matter (Yoshihara 1956, 202-
12
13 04, translated by Reiko Tomii in Tiampo and Munroe 2013, 18-19).

14
15
16 Explicit about their focus on materiality, the Gutai artists did not renounce the spiritual dimension of
17
18 their art; nor did they claim to create in a cultural and historical vacuum. Later works by Gutai leader
19
20 Yoshihara Jirō explicitly allude to this balancing act. Yoshihara's monumental Buddhist *ensō* circles, in
21
22 which the artist meditated by painting large circles with dripping paint, retain traces of the artist's
23
24 gestures along with signs of the liquid oil paint working against him. The Buddhist concept of
25
26 eternity is expressed in these works through the interaction between the conceptual action of the
27
28 artist and the material's resistance to him.

29
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31
32 This spiritualized rendering of materiality soon spilled from Japanese art into the realm of European
33
34 and American abstract art. Yves Klein created his famous "living brush" series from 1958 while
35
36 exposed, through his interest in judo and Zen philosophy, to East Asian philosophies. In this series he
37
38 used the paint-covered naked bodies of young female models as living brushes that left traces on the
39
40 canvas by jumping and throwing themselves against it, or rolling on it. The paint thus deposited on
41
42 the picture plane is fully comparable with the ink imprints of the calligraphic rubbings taken from
43
44 precious artifacts. The imprints of the body stake out the surface's contact with something sensory
45
46 and alive, celebrating the human body as deeply material, and establishing an equality between living
47
48 and non-living art materials and tools. Klein equated the touch of the model's body with the master's
49
50 touch on paper, chronicling the traces of this living contact. Imprinted in this way, the trace of
51
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1
2
3 matter doesn't create the illusion of neutrality or convey the absence of a human agenda. The
4
5 material is literally driven by artistic intention, and the imprint openly expresses human activity.
6
7

8
9 A similar spiritualization of materials in Euro-American abstract art can be seen in the famous
10 *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953, by Robert Rauschenberg (with the assistance of John Cage) (comment
11 23), where the use of imprints is directly derived from calligraphic ideas. By soaking automobile tires
12
13 in black paint, and literally driving them over long sheets of white papers spread on the ground, the
14
15 artists use imprints to communicate with material. Rauschenberg commented on the materiality of
16
17 this piece when he observed that it involved "a kind of friendly relationship with your materials
18
19 where you want them for what they are rather than for what you could make out of them" (AAA
20
21 interview with Rauschenberg 1965). Rauschenberg's engagement with materiality inscribes traces of
22
23 spirit that are suitably contemporary—the tracks of rubber tires—rather than the more timeless
24
25 marks of footsteps on earth or carvings in stone, suggesting that the human spirit manifests
26
27 differently in modern materiality. At the same time, however, the work shows that today's
28
29 technological objects, so often considered merely mechanical and soulless, can speak no less
30
31 eloquently than stone, wood, or rice paper.
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39 Yet despite their noticeable achievements in establishing a dialogue with Euro-American abstract
40
41 artists, the Japanese calligraphers later got trapped in their own rhetoric of spirituality (*seishinsei*).
42

43
44 Calligraphy's full-fledged participation in the international abstract art movement turned out to be as
45
46 intense and inspirational as short-lived. The general international movement towards geometrical
47
48 abstraction (as opposed to the lyrical abstraction closer to calligraphy); the birth of various anti-art
49
50 and non-art movements; and the rise of conceptual art and more explicitly politically engaged art—
51
52 all of this drew the interest of international audiences away from calligraphy. At the same time, many
53
54 factors caused a conservative backlash within the Japanese calligraphic community itself. (comment
55

1
2
3 17) A growing mutual skepticism between calligraphers and painters, coupled with the same
4
5 international interest in Zen and spirituality that had once brought calligraphy to the vanguard of the
6
7 abstract art movement, later paradoxically fueled the Japanese calligraphers' conservative reversal
8
9 and self-withdrawal from the world art scene. (comment 24) Influenced by the metaphysical rhetoric
10
11 of Zen in their quest for a fusion of the material with the spiritual, calligraphers started to openly
12
13 despise the former. A special issue of the *Bokubi* journal entitled "The Problem of Material" (January,
14
15 1960) prominently featured a discussion between two professors, Ijima Tsutomu and Terada Tōru,
16
17 from two of Japan's most highly regarded institutions, Kyoto University and Tokyo University,
18
19 respectively, on the role of material in calligraphy (Ijima and Terada 1960, 2-13). As a coda to their
20
21 discussion, Ijima delivered a summary of calligraphy's relation to materiality: "Spirituality (*seishinsei*)
22
23 is calligraphy's materiality" (Ijima and Terada 1960, 13). These words, canonized by Ijima's authority
24
25 among avant-garde calligraphers, disconnected Japanese calligraphy from the rest of the modern art
26
27 world, and erased all the efforts of early calligraphers in the realm of materiality. Ijima's statement
28
29 deprived calligraphy of any possibility of being regarded as a visual art, relocating it to the uncertain
30
31 status of a philosophical and religious cultural practice. Derailed, in this way, by the very spirituality
32
33 whose claims they had advanced, the avant-garde calligraphers' way of thinking about materiality
34
35 had returned, by the early 1960s, to a much more conservative course. Inoue Yūichi, deprived of his
36
37 mentor's conceptual input after Hasegawa Saburō departed to the United States in 1955, stopped
38
39 experimenting with rubbings in the mid-1950s and soon returned to the established handwritten ink-
40
41 on-paper mode. And although calligraphers continued to use *takuhon* rubbings extensively for
42
43 copying and learning old styles, they stopped regarding this technique as grounds for artistic
44
45 experimentation, returning to the time before the Yang Shoujing-initiated *takuhon* boom (comment
46
47 14) of the early Meiji. *Takuhon*'s designated role was once again to make accurate copies of classical
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3 models with a view to inheriting a tradition, rather than a way to leave one's own traces in history.

4
5 The various wood and stone textures found in rubbings, once so mesmerizing for Hasegawa and
6
7 Inoue, suddenly stopped seeming like magical fossils passed down from prehistoric times, and
8
9 became once again imperfections that prevented an adequate reading of the original writing and
10
11 obscured the deep spiritual meanings contained in the script. The magic of the material aspect of
12
13 calligraphy was dispelled by an increasingly officious rhetoric of high spirituality (*seishinsei*), as
14
15 advocated by Zen philosophy, which propagated an attitude of haughty disdain towards everything
16
17 earthly and ephemeral.
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21
22 Nevertheless, while the renewed discourse of spirituality turned out to be fatal for the discourse of
23
24 materiality within Japanese calligraphy, it proved to be highly fruitful in the context of international
25
26 postwar art, where it gave artists worldwide a new perspective from which to explore their
27
28 relationship with the material. (comment 3c, deleted passage) Under the impact of Sino-Japanese
29
30 calligraphy's specific conception of materiality and spirituality, the focus on materiality in postwar
31
32 international art shifted from a preoccupation with automatism to an appreciation of the intangible.
33
34 This shift was perhaps most visible in the medium of ink rubbings—both European surrealist and
35
36 Japanese calligraphic—and the interpretation of materiality attached to each. Thus the two floors—
37
38 one in a hotel room rented by Max Ernst in the French coastal city of Pornic, the other in the Tokyo
39
40 apartment of Inoue Yūichi—created a common ground for a dialogue that bridged cultures and
41
42 visual practices. In moving from the depersonalized wood floor of a hotel room where hundreds of
43
44 guests come and go, to the private space of a tatami room filled with family memories, postwar
45
46 materiality lost its preoccupation with automatism and became ready to embrace a view of materials
47
48 as spiritually resonant carriers of emotions and beliefs.
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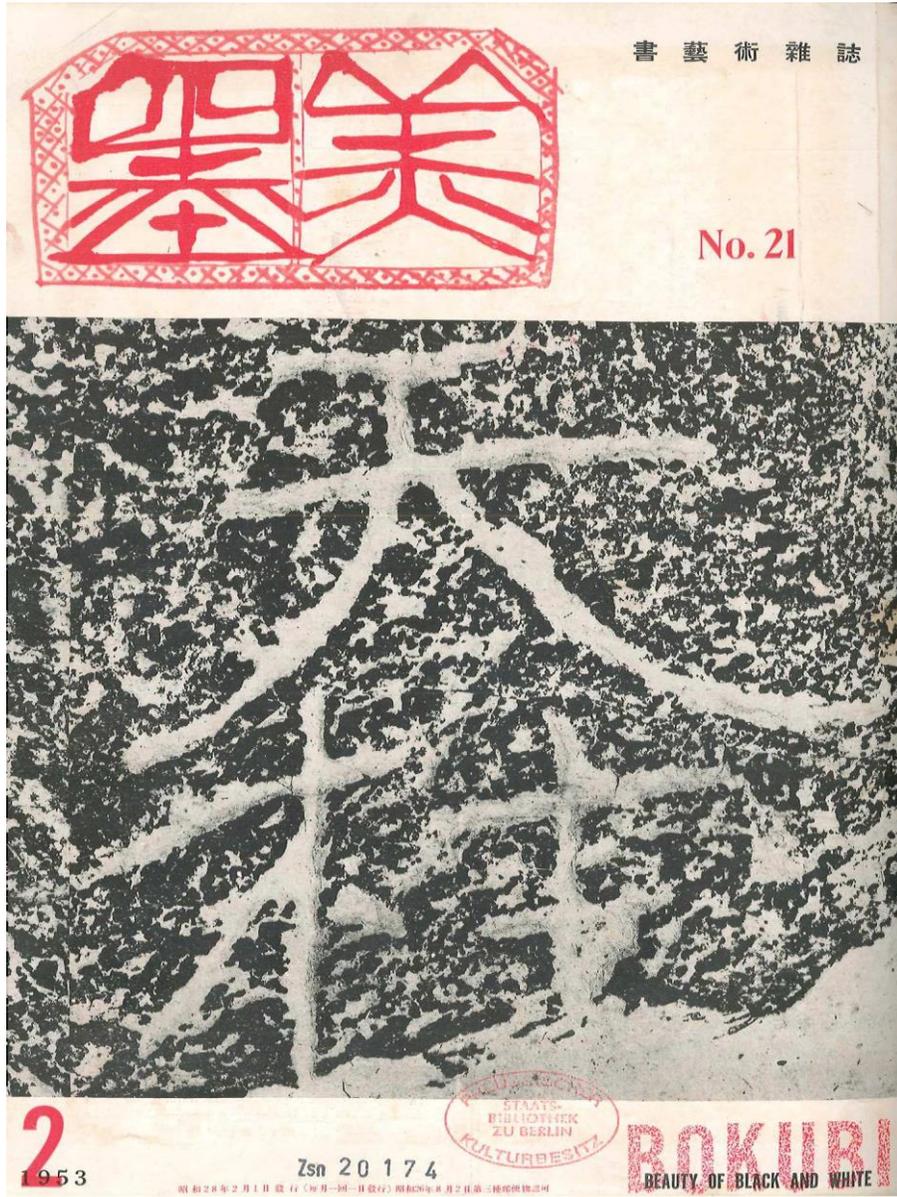
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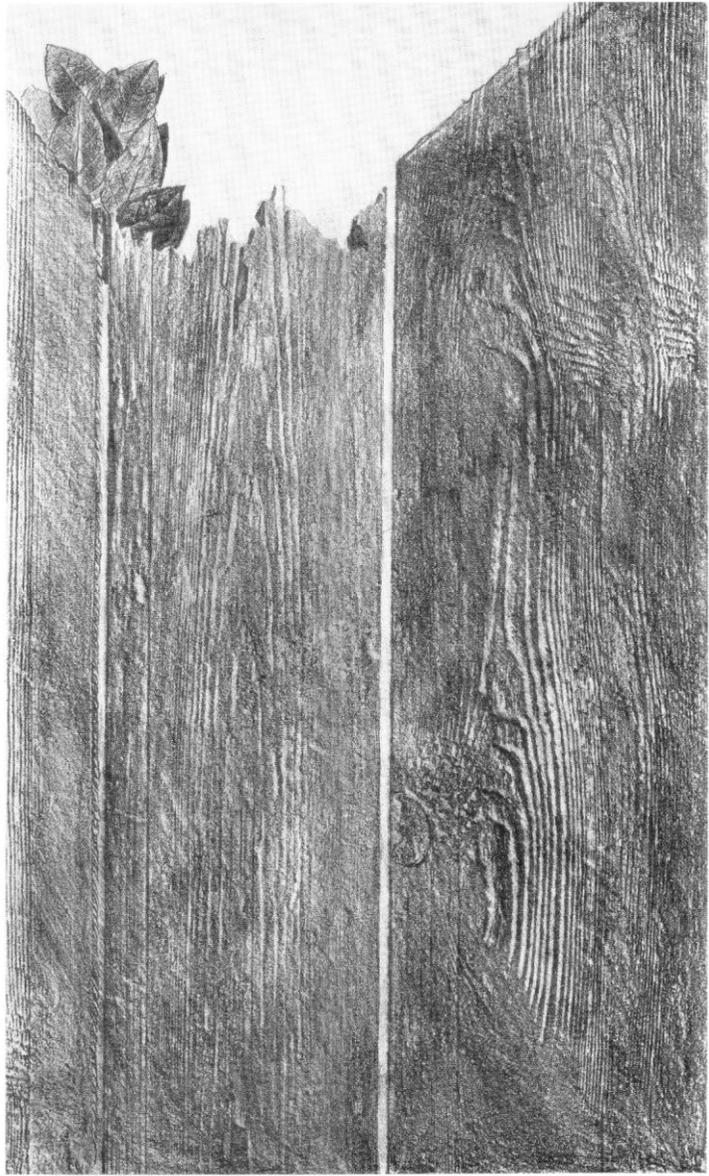
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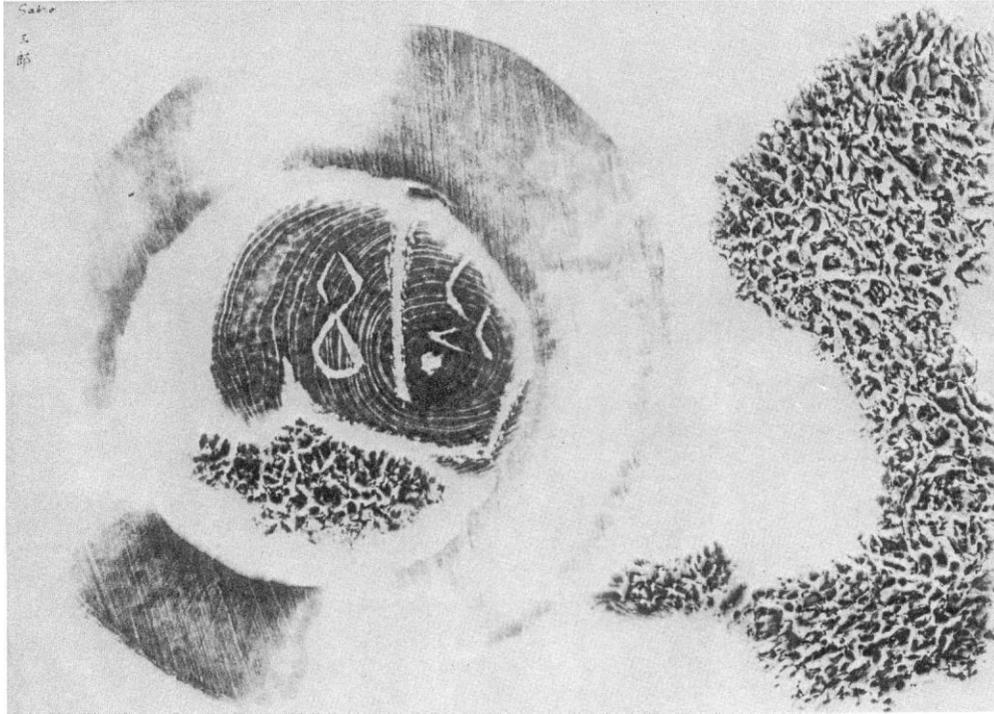


Cover of the Bokubi journal (No. 21, February 1953)
featuring a takuhon ink rubbing on its cover
461x612mm (96 x 96 DPI)

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Max Ernst
Mauerschleicher (Rasant les murs), 1925
frottage, 43x2,2 cm
Collection of the Museum of Modern Art New York

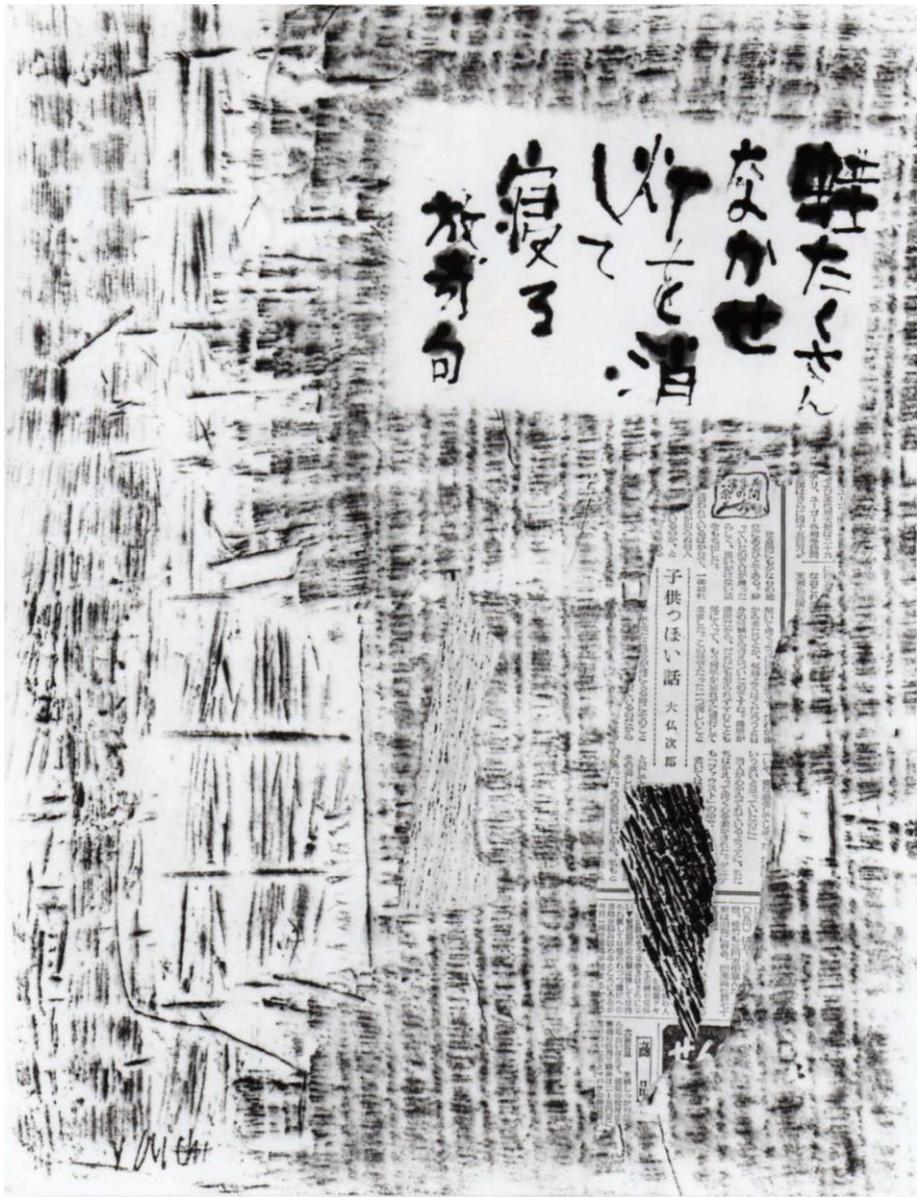


Hasegawa Saburō
Nature, 1952

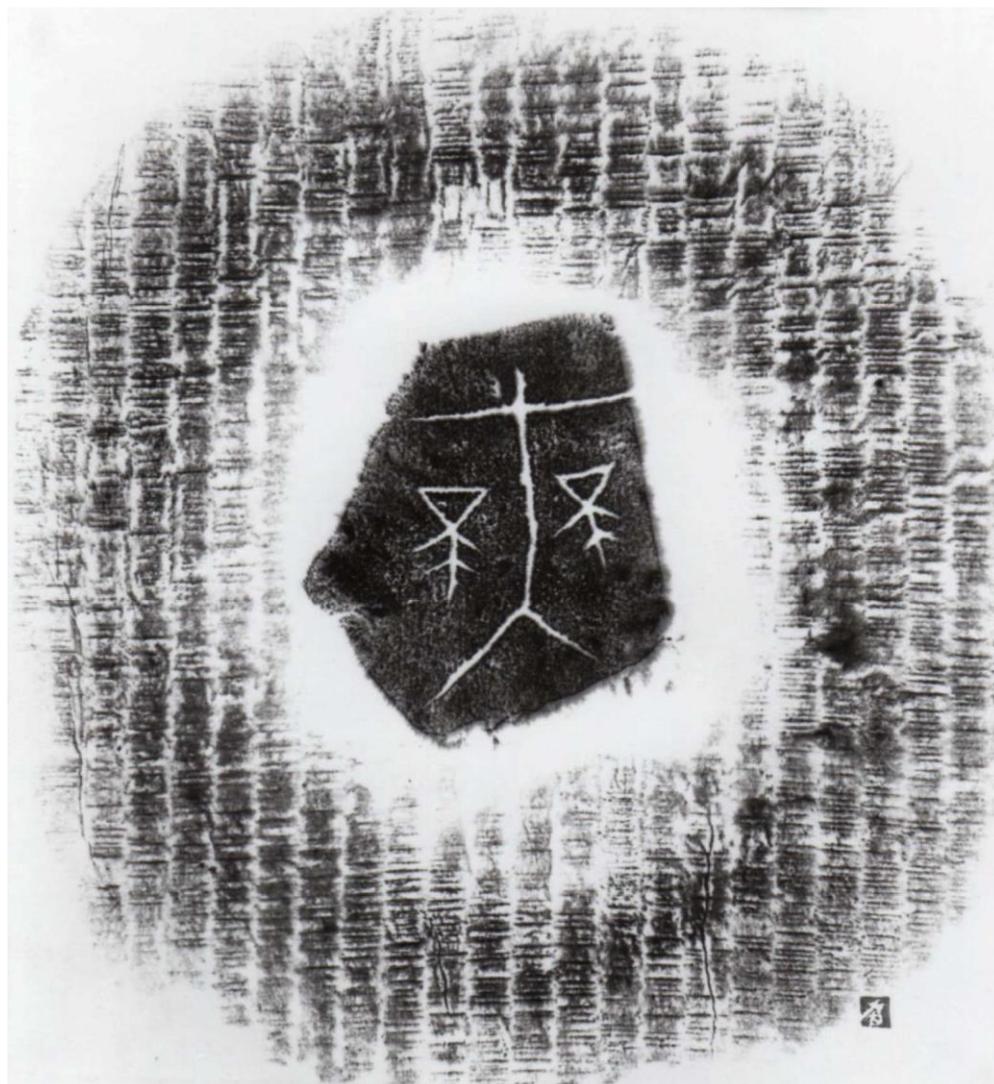
takuhon ink rubbing on paper, 69.8×97.8 cm
Collection of the Museum of Modern Art Kyoto

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Inoue Yūichi
 Frog Choir („Letting a frog choir croak, I turn off the light and sleep“), 1952
 takuhon ink rubbing on paper, 36.0×27.5 cm
 Collection of the UNAC Salon Tokyo



Inoue Yūichi,
Mu (Nothingness), 1952
takuhon rubbing on paper, 52.0×32.0 cm
Collection of the UNAC Salon Tokyo

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