

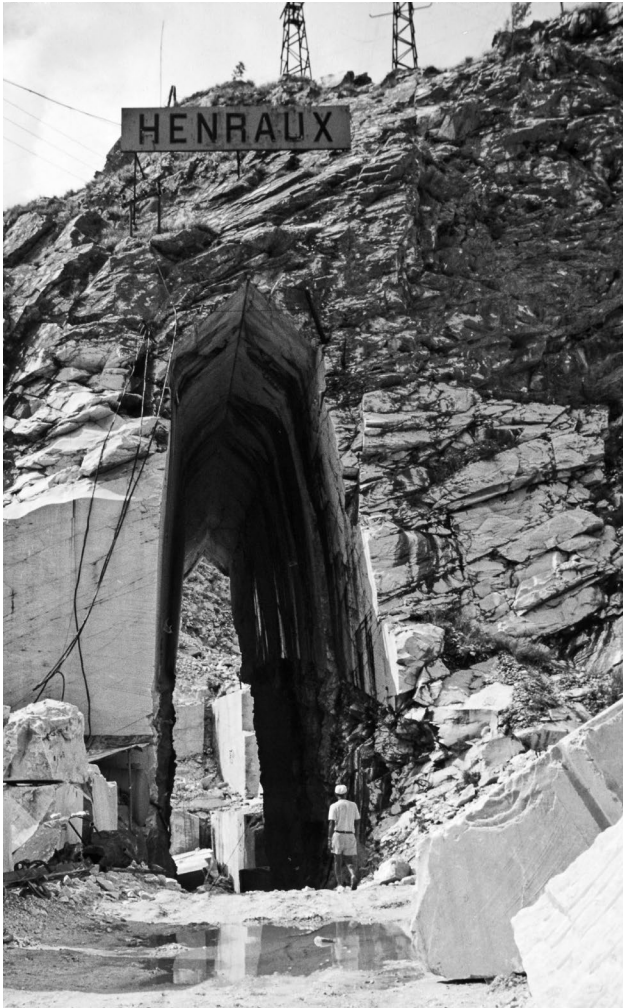


noguchi

Salvaged Time

FEB 23 – MAY 15, 2022





## Salvaged Time BY MATTHEW KIRSCH

In 1962, Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) began conducting an extended exploration of stand-alone sculpture at open-air workshops and studios adjacent to quarries and stonecutting facilities—first at Pietrasanta, Italy, and then, in 1969, in Mure, Japan. These residencies signaled not only a shift from the isolation of Noguchi’s previous studios to industrial village settings abutting nature but also a creative renewal through exposure to freshly sourced stone. Observing the mechanics of stone being cut at its point of origin, Noguchi witnessed the imprecision involved in fracturing marble and the logistical foresight and skill necessary to make granite cleave somewhat predictably. He arrived at new insights into the inner composition of stone as a natural register of the external and material conditions that shaped it on a geological timescale and as a measure of earthly existence beyond human quantification. This led him to gradually incorporate the life of stone as an overarching theme in his work.

In its semi-processed state, stone inspired Noguchi as a model to imitate and as a source of contradictions to

reconcile in his own sculpture. Relating his failed attempt at negotiating shipment of the “beautiful waste” he saw at black-granite quarries in the south of Sweden during a visit in 1972, Isamu Noguchi was effusive:

*It’s the waste in the world that makes for the beauty of the world, the accidents, the things that people don’t even know about. Nature is constantly throwing off waste and all this awareness of the texture of the world is lost through machine making. There comes man’s intervention where he can still save for art that which is discarded by the machines. So that a lot of what I’m doing is a kind of discovery on my own part and other people begin to see it too.*<sup>1</sup>

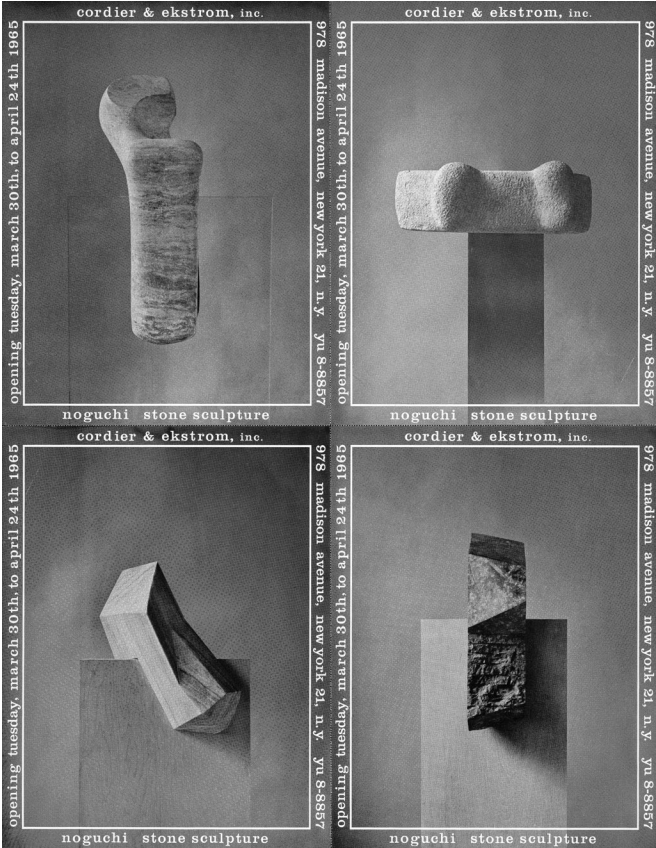
*Salvaged Time* surveys Noguchi’s search for expressive potential in stone, even extending to its afterlife, so to speak, in the many instances when he repurposed



ABOVE *Variation on a Millstone #2*, 1962.  
OPPOSITE PAGE Isamu Noguchi at Henraux Quarry, Italy, c. 1970.  
Photo: Arnold Eagle. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 07304.

fragments and other remainders from his own practice. Sensitive to the particularities of stone from different locales and to the visual evidence of its quarrying and unearthing, Noguchi readily accommodated “the accidents of its being and making”<sup>2</sup> into his own processes, working with specimens large and small. Noguchi also found and reclaimed stones, either in natural or previously worked and discarded states, and recast them in forms and uses of his own invention.

A handful of works Noguchi made from disused millstones are an excellent example. Found all over the world as common grinding tools, millstones have remarkably complex surfaces, with their radiating furrows for moving grain in and out, and lands, raised areas for grinding. With *Variation on a Millstone #2* (1962), Noguchi (quite literally) elevated an altered millstone element beyond its previous utility, reorienting it to an upright position atop a wood and steel-plate base. *Variation on a Millstone #4* (1963) appears to be Noguchi’s own sculptural emulation of the bed-stone element of a millstone, imitating its essential



Exhibition flyer for *Noguchi: Stone Sculpture*, Cordier & Ekstrom, Inc., New York, March 30–April 24, 1965. *Ceremonial Object for Marcel Duchamp* (1963–64) is shown in the upper left. The Noguchi Museum Archives, MS\_EXH\_077\_004.

contact with earth, and falling neatly within Noguchi’s established vocabulary of placing sculpture directly on the ground plane.<sup>3</sup> Two *Variations* were exhibited at the gallery Cordier & Ekstrom in 1965 alongside a carved and polished serpentine form perched on a pane of tempered glass titled *Ceremonial Object for Marcel Duchamp* (1963–64), a reference to the artist who introduced the concept of readymade objects into art. As Noguchi later summarized his matter-of-fact transformation of these millstones, “I made them mine and I made them sculpture.”<sup>4</sup>

The unique studio arrangement Noguchi enjoyed in Mure aligned the critical puzzle pieces required to enable his exploration of hard stone: state of the art stonecutting tools, access to regional stone of different characters and mineral compositions, and, most crucially, time. There he developed a practice rooted in improvisation, inspired purely by proximity to stone. With no predetermined outcome, Noguchi studied the inherent physical character of a stone before making any contact with it. Everything that followed his initial breakage into a given piece of stone became part





of an expanded dialogue, one that eventually included the residues of his process.

*It is through discovery and especially through mistakes, you might say, you think, “My god, I’ve ruined the whole thing” and then you let it alone for awhile, until you find it’s just another piece of stone and you might as well proceed from there. So it’s amazing how the stone recoups its possibility after you’ve despaired and thrown it away, and it’s beyond you, and the stone gradually comes back to you and reveals, and says, “Look here, you’ve got plenty of stone left.”*<sup>5</sup>

*Narrow Gate* (1981) exemplifies how Noguchi internalized the industrial processing of stone as a creative outlet. The work began its life as an end piece split from a large basalt column at Mure, the kind of rough and irregular discard typically removed from the desirable core mass during the dressing of stone. Noguchi cut this end piece into smaller components before reassembling them into a reconstituted whole. In the placement Noguchi chose for it in Area 1, *Narrow Gate* is positioned to emphasize the interior face

marked by horizontal slashes resulting from stone drilling and splitting, which he further embellished into an even, rhythmic pattern. On its exterior face, Noguchi’s own markings are subordinate to the basalt’s mostly unspoiled outer crust, which acts as an index of how stone ages in nature.

Noguchi did just about everything to a stone that hand and machine tools can do: from surface polishing, to revealing glimpses of stone’s interior essence, to turning stones into self-contained structures by creating open chambers within them where light and air could enter. In *Core (Cored Sculpture)* (1978), located in the Museum’s garden, Noguchi used a core drill to puncture the basalt’s uneven crown and excavate a central passage extending through its full height; he drilled two portholes into its front and back. Attentive to revealing the unseen essence of stone, Noguchi grew interested in the cylindrical by-products of coring and set them aside in the studio yard at Mure. Incising minimal features on their seemingly uniform surfaces, Noguchi evoked human anatomy, as in the floor piece *Core Composition* (1982). The diminutive scale and dimensions of these cores also recalled the sculptor’s portrait busts, such as in the imposing countenance of *Warlord* (1978).

In the same spirit, Noguchi reclaimed the small, ovoid Aji granite stones that he termed “practice” stones, used by his studio assistants at Mure to test their consistency in point chiseling. Noguchi made angled cuts into the stones, sometimes arraying their bisected halves to expose a polished, darker core. In the case of *Practice Muse* (1978), he incised a fissure that convincingly made the stone look as if it were cut in two, suggesting the latent energy concealed within. At other times, Noguchi left the Aji stones whole (at least seemingly so) and made notches in individual stones to fit them together in clusters recalling natural rock formations.

Many of the titles Noguchi chose for works found in the Museum’s galleries speak to similar transformations, emergences, and states of becoming that resulted from his dialogues with stone—instances when Noguchi felt their matter attained both personal meaning and a sense of finality. As he described it:

*The making of sculpture becomes a ritual when the sculptor becomes as one with it and the parts fall into its whole as if in a trance. The residue returns to the earth, or on occasion reappears clothed in new identity.*<sup>6</sup>



OPPOSITE PAGE Sculptures from reworked core pieces and practice stones, on display at Noguchi’s studio in Mure, Japan, c. 1978. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 07363. LEFT *Core (Cored Sculpture)*, 1978.

1 Transcript of interview with Isamu Noguchi for the Venice Biennale, 1986. The Noguchi Museum Archives, MS\_WRI\_068\_001, 13.

2 Isamu Noguchi, *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 98.

3 There is no photographic evidence of *Variation on a Millstone #4*’s only known installation as part of *Noguchi: Stone Sculpture* at Cordier & Ekstrom in New York in 1965. No hole is drilled in its rim for the pin of a pedestal, leading The Noguchi Museum curators to believe it is the only *Variation* meant to be installed in a horizontal orientation. *Variation on a Millstone #1* (back cover), another vertically oriented millstone on a wood and steel-plate base, was also shown in this Cordier & Ekstrom exhibition.

4 Noguchi, *Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum*, 114.

5 Noguchi interview for Venice Biennale, 1986. The Noguchi Museum Archives, MS\_WRI\_068\_001, 12.

6 Noguchi, *Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum*, 124.



Area 6

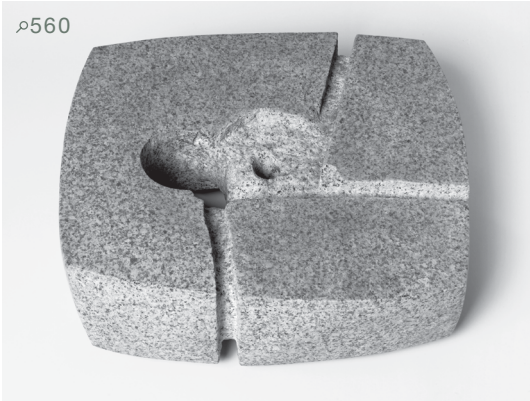


Narrow Gate  
1981 • Basalt  
*End piece*



Untitled  
1981 • Obsidian, stainless steel, wire, wood  
*Fragment, suspended*

All artworks by Isamu Noguchi  
Collection of The Isamu Noguchi  
Foundation and Garden Museum



Variation on a Millstone #4  
1963 • Granite  
*Millstone-inspired sculpture*



Variation on a Millstone #2  
1962 • Granite, wood and steel-plate base  
*Found and altered millstone*



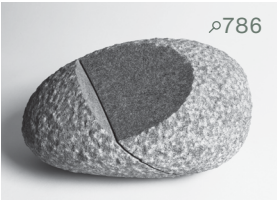
Untitled  
1978 • Swedish granite  
*Core*



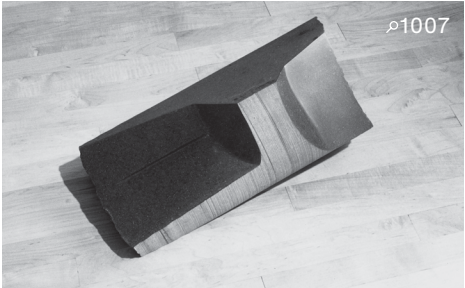
Untitled  
1978 • Aji granite  
*Practice stone*



Warlord  
1978 • Granite  
*Core*



Practice Muse  
1978 • Aji granite  
*Practice stone*



Core Composition  
1982 • Basalt  
*Core*



Untitled  
1943 • Driftwood, wood, wire  
*Found driftwood*



The Mountain Core  
1978 • Aji granite  
*Core*



Untitled  
1978 • Basalt  
*Core*



Petroglyph  
1974 • Basalt  
*Cored fragment*



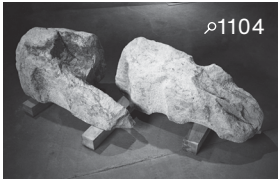
Creative Reuse Throughout the Museum

*Salvaged Time* focuses on Noguchi’s stone sculpture, but it is also intended as a jumping-off point to discover related works using repurposed material elsewhere in the Museum. One aspect of this repurposing is found in the many adapted solutions for the display of sculpture that Noguchi employed. For instance, while Noguchi used rough-hewn granite discards from Mure as bases for the majority of the heavier stone sculptures in the first-floor galleries, he placed a handful of sculptures on distinctive bases fabricated from pine recovered from an abandoned structure in Japan. The Noguchi Museum’s origin as a private display space, extending the atmosphere of experimentation in Noguchi’s studio, is very much in evidence, although often hidden in plain sight.

Area 3



**The Seeker Sought**  
1969 • Basalt  
*From same boulder as Resonance, on base of recycled Japanese pine*



**Transformation of Nature (Shizen No Henka)**  
1984 • Mikage granite  
*Found and altered stone displayed on wood beams from Mure studio*



**Time Thinking**  
1968 • Basalt  
*On base of recycled Japanese pine*



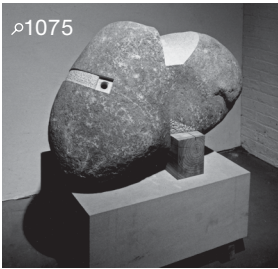
**End Piece**  
1974 • Basalt, corten steel  
*End piece on steel base*



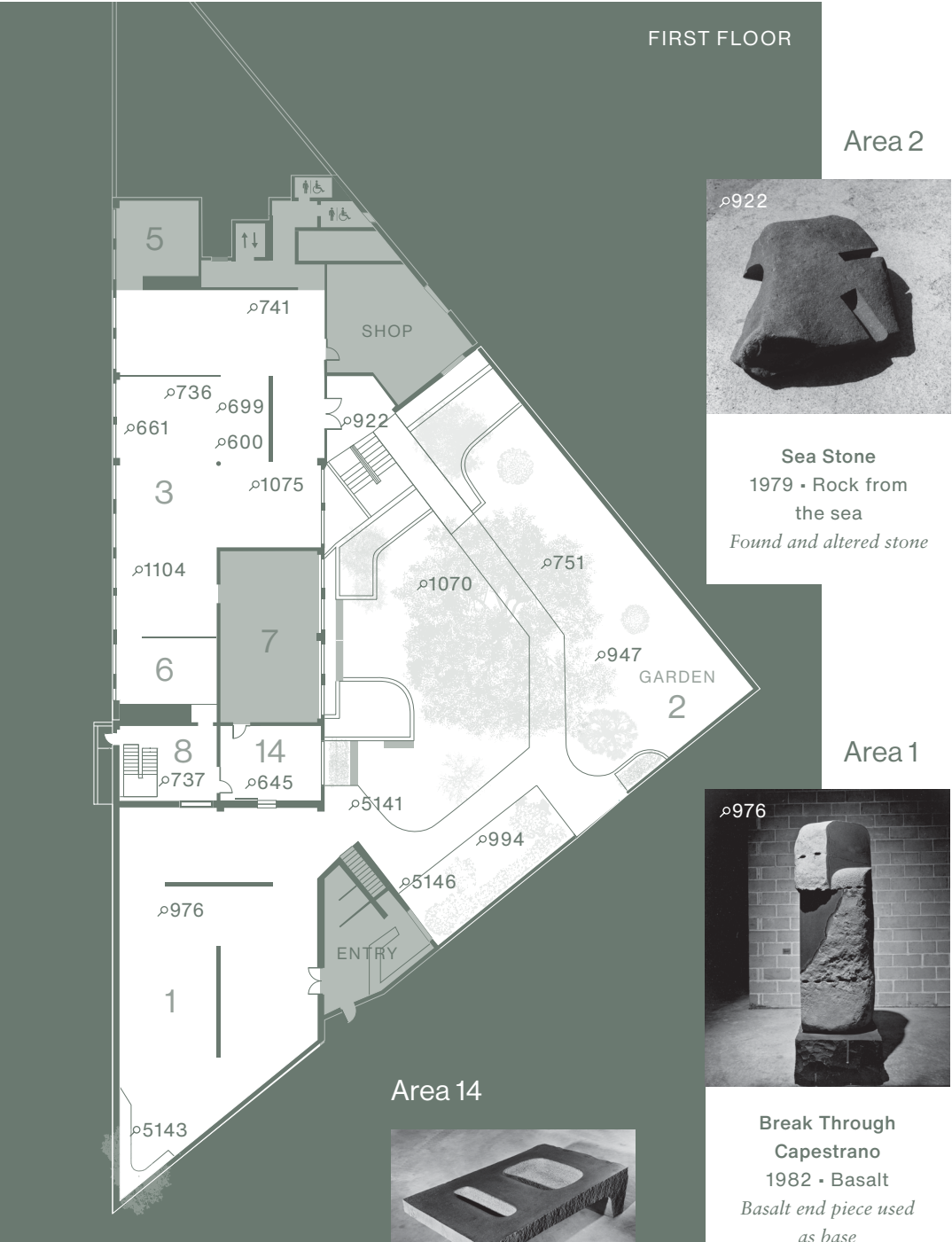
**Heart of Darkness**  
1974 • Obsidian  
*On base of recycled Japanese pine*



**Resonance**  
1966–67 • Basalt  
*From same boulder as The Seeker Sought, on base of recycled Japanese pine*



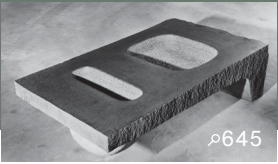
**Magic Mountain**  
1984 • Mikage granite  
*Found and altered stone*



Area 8



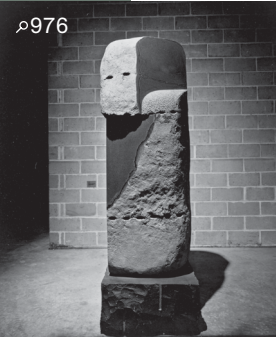
**End Pieces**  
1974 • Swedish granite  
*End pieces*



**Water Table**  
1968 • Granite, natural granite stone, water  
*Natural granite stone used as support*



**Spin-off #3 from Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza**  
1961–64 • Naturally formed Uji River granite  
*Found stone*



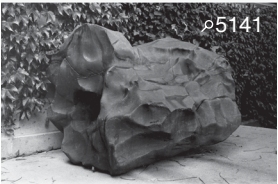
**Break Through Capestrano**  
1982 • Basalt  
*Basalt end piece used as base*



**Sea Stone**  
1979 • Rock from the sea  
*Found and altered stone*



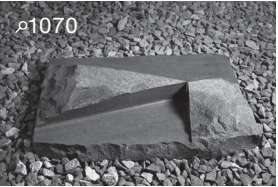
**Behind Inner Seeking Shiva Dancing**  
1975–81 • Basalt  
*Basalt section removed from The Great Rock of Inner Seeking (1974, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC) and sculpted 1975–81*



**Spin-off #1 from Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza**  
1961–64  
Naturally formed Uji River granite  
*Found stone*



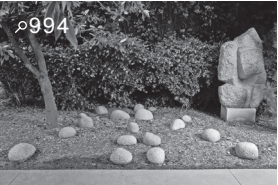
**Spin-off #1 from Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza**  
1961–64  
Naturally formed Uji River granite  
*Found stone*



**Basin and Range**  
1984 • Miharu granite  
*(Probable) end piece*



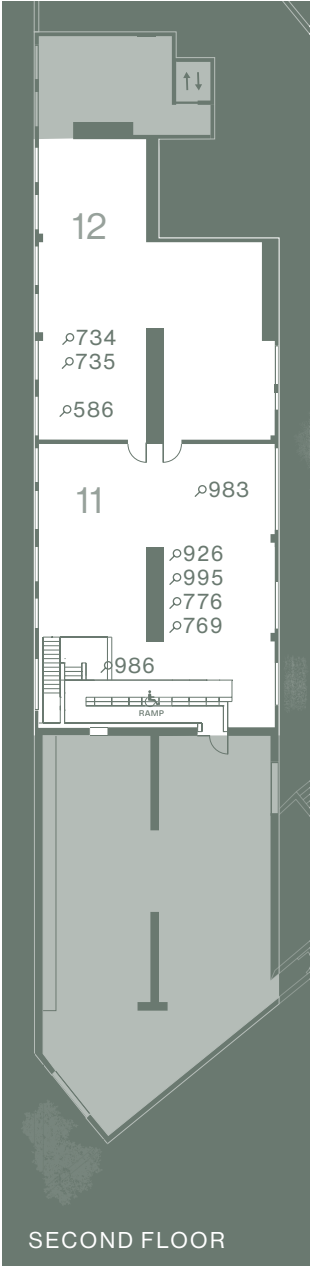
**To Tallness**  
1981 • Manazuru stone  
*Millstone as base*



**Practice Rocks in Placement**  
1982–83 • Aji granite  
*Practice stones*



Areas 11 & 12



The works in Areas 11 and 12 are installed as part of *Noguchi: Useless Architecture*, on view until May 8, 2022.



**Core Piece #1**  
1974 • Basalt  
*Core*



**Core Piece #2**  
1974 • Basalt  
*Core*



**Horizon Stone**  
1982 • Granite, steel  
*Core piece on steel base*



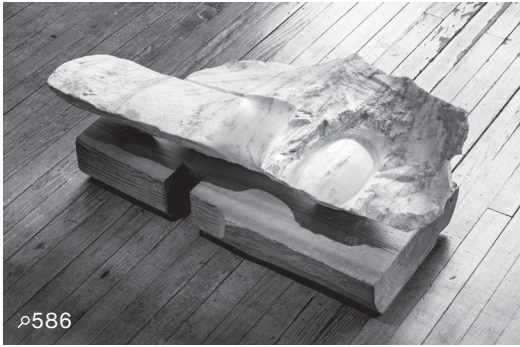
**Costume for a Stone**  
1982 • Granite, hot-dipped galvanized steel  
*Fragment mounted on steel*



**On the Perch**  
1978 • Basalt, stainless steel  
*Fragment mounted on steel*



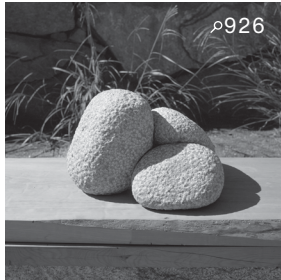
**Black Cores Recumbent**  
1978 • Swedish granite  
*Core pieces*



**Asleep in a Rock**  
c. 1966 • Marble  
*Altered fragment on base of recycled Japanese pine*

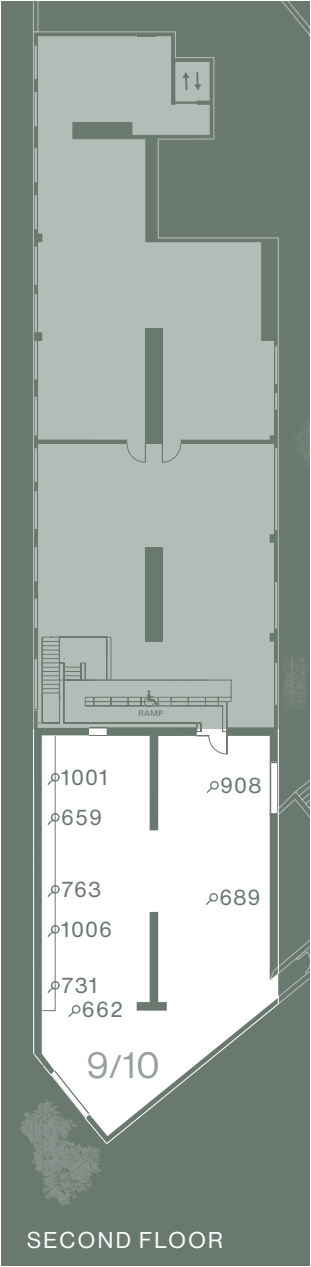


**Reborn Stone**  
1982 • Granite, corten steel  
*Fragment on steel base*



**Triple Nest**  
1979 • Aji granite  
*Practice stones*

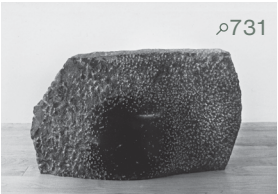
Areas 9 & 10



**Core Passages**  
1979 • Basalt  
*Cored basalt*



**Night Wind**  
1970 • Basalt  
*On base of recycled Japanese pine*



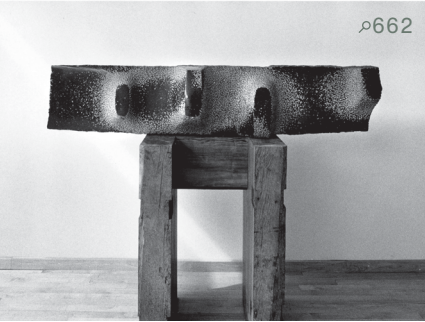
**Black Planet**  
1973 • Basalt  
*(Probable) end piece*



**Untitled (Core)**  
1982 • Basalt  
*Core*



**Binary Practice**  
1978 • Aji granite  
*Practice stones*



**Seeker Variation**  
1969 • Granite  
*(Probable) end piece on base of recycled Japanese pine*



**The Letter One**  
1969 • Basalt  
*Altered fragment*



**Torso**  
1982 • Granite, hot-dipped galvanized steel  
*Fragment on steel base*



The object numbers in this catalogue correspond to the work's number in the Isamu Noguchi Catalogue Raisonné ([catalogue.noguchi.org](http://catalogue.noguchi.org)) and in the Noguchi Museum's mobile guide on the free Bloomberg Connects app.



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To use the mobile guide, download Bloomberg Connects and open the Noguchi Museum guide. Enter the lookup number to learn more about any of the works on view.

FRONT COVER Isamu Noguchi working on *Small Practices* (1979). Photo: Michio Noguchi. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 04148.

RIGHT Isamu Noguchi and a child looking through *Variation on a Millstone #1* (1962). Photo: Ruiiko Yoshida. The Noguchi Museum Archives, 06285.

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*Salvaged Time*

Curated by Matthew Kirsch

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