

Title: OUTSIDE IN, INSIDE OUT

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OUTSIDE IN, INSIDE OUT

HOW DO CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS SUBVERT TRADITIONAL CASTING TECHNIQUES?

This essay explores how contemporary artists subvert traditional casting processes. I will conduct research into emptiness, space, and technical reproduction, which are factors that influence traditional methods of casting, and exploring theories by Edward T. Hall, Walter Benjamin and John Berger. For my case studies, I will be analysing the works of Rachel Whiteread, Antony Gormley and Yasuaki Onishi. I will also compare Western and Asian ideals of space and use within society and culture.

According to Buddhist beliefs “the nature of the objects of ordinary experience is emptiness and that the ultimate truth cum emptiness is to be found in the objects of ordinary experience” (Buswell & Lopez, 2013, p. 722). Therefore, one cannot be had without the other; an object’s experience is emptiness, and emptiness will be found in objects. Indeed, The Heart Sutra which is a Mahāyāna Buddhism text simplifies this to “form is empty, emptiness is form” (FPMT, 2008, p.4). In Mahāyāna Buddhism the definition of emptiness denotes not nothingness or an absence, but the lack of a “falsely imagined type of existence” (Buswell & Lopez, 2013, p. 872). The term is used to describe the “absence of intrinsic nature” (Buswell & Lopez, 2013, p. 872), and in contrast, the Western definition is more literal. Cambell, Giovine and Keating (2019, p. 1) state that emptiness is an absence of presence, a “nothingness, a perfect void” which is reiterated by Whorf’s (2017, p. 37) definition of “null and void, negative”. This term implies that something should be full, for example a drawer is empty without clothes, a glass is empty without water and a room is empty when there is an absence of people and/or objects. However, Whorf (2017, p. 37) also has an alternative definition to empty which is “applied in analysis of physical situations without regard to, e.g., vapour, liquid vestiges, or stray rubbish, in the container”. This definition takes into consideration that there are exceptions to the term, including air, rubbish and hazardous vapour. For example, this explanation implies that though a glass is classed as empty without water inside, the glass is full of air. The

interpretation of “form is empty, emptiness is form” (FPMT, 2008, p.4) can change dependant on the definition of empty. Using the Mahāyāna definition of *emptiness*, the nature of the quote can be applied to the lack of intrinsic nature in objects and the emptiness of objects that we possess.

As Chapman states in *Meaningful Stuff: Design That Lasts* (2021, p. 1), society has become obsessed with objects, never have we “owned so much, wanted so much and wasted so much” and he questions the purpose of the objects that are perceived as “meaningful”. Using semiotics to explain this further, objects are seen as a product of desire as when they are bought, owned and displayed they connote wealth, comfort, and status amongst other characteristics. Without the connotations of these objects, they hold no intrinsic value, their value is intertwined with the symbolism it carries. Another interpretation of the quote can be applied to the process of casting, as the forms are created through negative space, and negative space is responsible for the creation of these forms. Additionally, the statement could be applied to how emptiness can give forms their function such as glasses, drawers and bins. The cavity that is present within the object is what makes the object useful. These forms are therefore empty, and their purposeful cavity provides the object with its function.

Emptiness is a phrase that is greatly associated with space. Lefebvre (1991, p. 1) states that the term space was used to strictly refer to an empty area, however, it has gradually caught the attention of multiple theorists throughout the 20th century to question, *what is space?* Hubbard, Kitchin and Valentine (2004, p. 5) state that “[spaces] are seen as fundamental in expressing a sense of belonging for those who live in them and are seen as providing a locus for identity”. Hall (1990, p. 63) confines this statement, commenting that space is intimately associated with a person’s sense of self. Individuals can make a space their own through personalization and determining the function of the area and their needs, and public spaces are formed by analysing the purpose and function. Perceptions of social and personal space are different for every person and how space is navigated is determined by each individual and their culture.

Hall states in *Hidden Dimensions* that space in Japan and the West are “perceived entirely differently” (1990, p. 75). Hall (1990, p. 75) further elaborates, commenting that in the West, the focus is not on the space in between but the objects themselves. In contrast, the people of Japan see and acknowledge these spaces, which is recognized as *ma* (Hall, 1990, p. 75). *Ma* is generally understood as the distance between two or more objects or events (Pilgrim, 1986, p. 256), however, its other translations include ‘gap’, ‘opening’, ‘time in between’ or ‘space in between’, but these translations fail to appreciate the true nature of this phrase (Bracken, 2019, p. 250). Bracken (2019, p. 250) further elaborates, stating “[ma] is not just a gap between two doors; it is the change and movement, the energization happening within this gap” and describes the phenomenon as a charged field. *Ma* is intangible, it cannot be touched, it exists in between everything and everyone. Throughout Japanese culture, the ‘gap’ allows the existence of functions and relationships between people and objects (Eastgate, 2018). Matsumoto (2020) states that *ma* in architecture refers to the empty space that is intentionally designed in a room. The interior features no decorative fixtures or ornaments, it is a space “free from material attachment” (Matsumoto, 2020) and focuses on the life that is being inhabited. A bare space that only focuses on the necessities is a characteristic of minimalism, and minimalism is not necessarily a principle that is implemented in Western living spaces. Spaces tend to be overcrowded with an excess of possessions and objects which prevents the inhabitants from focusing on the now due to numerous distractions.

Ma is also present in conversation in the form of pauses between dialogue (Hall, 2011). In Western culture, individuals tend to be “a little afraid” (Hall, 2011) of pausing in between a discussion as it can be perceived as awkwardness, whereas Japanese people appreciate the blank period. Instead of comfortable silence to provoke thinking, Westerners commonly include phrases such as ‘umm’ and ‘like’ in their conversations to fill the empty spaces. These phrases are commonly cut out in radio and podcasts and are rarely seen in TV as they tend to take up time which lessens the significance of

a statement and diminishes the speaker's credibility (Ravinal, 2021). In Japan, these comfortable silences allow for thinking and are not rushed as all words are considered.

Ma is therefore a phenomenon and has an interchangeable definition dependent on the context. In contrast, the West's counterpart to *ma* is negative space, however, this term does not bear any significance to the average Western person in their day-to-day life as the West is not conditioned to consider the negative space. In contrast to *ma*, the connotations of negative space are ill considered, however this space allows for light, a pause, and movement. DeGuzman (2022) describes negative space as the surrounding area of a subject that typically lacks detail to draw the eye and to bring focus onto the artefact. The term can be applied to describe the empty space of a room, to a rest in a piece of music and a silence in a film. It is the blank space that occupies the in between and though typically ignored, it improves the existence of the artefact by adding another aspect. In a painting, the use of negative space provides an element of balance while the positive space bears the action (Kočíb, 1986, p. 141) which is comparable to the emptiness of a room offering balance while the positive space provides function. A pause in music separates the notes from bleeding into one another and in a vase, the negative space provides its function. In casting, the negative space transforms a void into a solid space.

Space that is made solid creates the mould and includes the complexity of the pattern. Pattern refers to the object that is being cast, the casting material and the cast run (Brooks, 2012, p. 15). Regardless of the outcomes of these considerations, positive and negative space is a key principle of mould making, as a positive form is transformed into a void, and subsequently a cast is created, replicating the original form (Brooks, 2012, p. 16). To illustrate this transformation, a multi-piece reusable plaster mould of a bottle will be used. The bottle is firstly separated into sections that are determined by the forms' undercuts. In this instance, the undercut points run along the halfway line of the bottle as any point beyond this line, the bottle will be "locked" into the mould (Brooks, 2012, p. 16). A temporary clay bed is subsequently formed around the bottle along the undercut points

that were previously determined, a barrier is constructed around the clay bed (*Figure 1*) and plaster is poured on top (*Figure 2*) (Brooks, 2012, pp. 46 – 47). Once the plaster has dried, the mould is inverted and the barrier and the clay bed are removed (*Figure 3*) (Wardell, 2007, p. 64). The process is then repeated for the other section (*Figure 4*), creating a two-piece reusable mould of a bottle (*Figure 5*). In this instance, the mould was used to create slip-casts of the bottle. Slip was poured into the funnel cavity to the top, swirled and poured out, then the mould is taken apart. This leaves a solid, positive form that keeps its shape. Positive space therefore becomes negative then positive. The negative space allows the pattern to change into a different material and take on a different purpose.



Figure 1: Clay bed is formed around the bottle, and the retaining walls are put in place



Figure 2: Plaster is poured



Figure 3: The walls of the mould have been removed, showing the completed mould piece and the clay bed



Figure 4: The clay bed is removed and retaining walls are put in place



Figure 5: The plaster has been into the cavity of Figure 4. Once dried, the mould can be pulled apart, the bottle released, revealing the two-part mould

Casting was traditionally used as a method of technological reproduction and this method firstly occurred in communities where votive offerings were buried with the dead (Brooks, 2012, p. 7). As the demand for repeated designs increased, various techniques of mould-making and casting were implemented to speed up production (Brooks, 2012, p. 7). Casting was only able to replicate products, such as coins and statues (Benjamin, 2008, p.3), and once technological reproduction evolved to include lithography, printing and photography, culture changed drastically. Technological reproduction is a constant feature of the day-to-day, in the forms of magazines, advertising, and wall posters. As Berger states in *Ways of Seeing* (1986, p. 32), the degree of which technological reproduction is used in our daily lives is to “promote the illusion that nothing has changed” and as the majority of people can now appreciate art, it is not something that is questioned. Due to the countless resources that are available to us, we are familiarised with famous paintings, landmarks and sculptures, and if not, we can easily become informed because of books and the internet. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (2008), Benjamin argues that technological reproduction removes the *aura* from a piece of original artwork. Three factors that are considered

when discussing the aura are the genuineness of an artwork, the artist's hand, and the artwork's context. An original artwork's *aura* is lessened when a piece is photographed as the audience is no longer once removed from the artist, whereas in a gallery a piece of art is in front of the viewer, and the proximity to the artwork creates a closer connection to the artist. Additionally, a similar event also occurs when a piece is reproduced physically by someone other than the original artist as the artist did not create the artwork, therefore the artwork is not genuine. Furthermore, the aura of a piece of artwork also lays in its relative time-period. Benjamin (2008, pp. 10-11) discusses that the oldest artworks are intertwined with magic and religion, and it is important to not separate these pieces of art from its traditional value, as in the instance of a piece undergoing technological reproduction in the form of photography, this connection is lost and consequently the original works' aura is lessened. Berger (1986, p. 19-20) elaborates on this point, stating how TVs have enabled a painting to "enter" a viewer's house, and be surrounded by the family's environment. This in turn "lends its meaning to their meaning" (Berger, 1986, p. 20) and the painting's context is everchanging depending on the environment it enters, and therefore the original context of the piece no longer remains.

In casting, the *aura* of an original piece of work arguably does not exist as casting tends to be reproduced from objects, and as objects undergo mass production, their aura is diminished. Furthermore, despite a cast being created from a form made by the hand, the genuine piece of work no longer possesses the *aura* as it is no longer a one-off and therefore loses its meaning. Consequently, as Benjamin (2008, p.11) states, the object is "designed for reproducibility". Once a piece has been replicated, it has been designed for duplication. Though casting was traditionally used as a method of technological reproduction, contemporary artists have employed this process as an artform, creating one-off casts, pushing the boundaries of the mould-making process which utilizes concepts such as space within the artform itself. Thus the *aura* of a piece can therefore be invoked, and *Ghost* (1990) by Rachel Whiteread is no exception. Despite traditional casting being the

language of reproduction, she challenges this preconception and transforms the process into the language of the *aura* and art.



Figure 6: Ghost

For the proposal of *Ghost*, Whiteread's intention was to mummify "the air in the room" (Whiteread, 2004), in other words, transform the negative space into a positive artefact. The traditional narrative of positive-negative-positive is not adhered to and alternatively she follows a negative-positive narrative, where the walls of an object become a mould and only one cast is created. Commenting on Whiteread's work, Cole (2004, p. 39) states that she makes the "invisible visible", by challenging the accepted normality of space extremes. Through the process of casting, the living room transformed into an object that can be felt and walked around; the cracks that ran through the walls presently lay pronounced on the surface; and a space that was previously inhabited by a family cannot be entered. When reflecting upon *Ghost*, one finds that it is possible to seek the negative space of the room and visualize the original space in their mind. This is an irregular occurrence when examining a piece of art or sculpture as the viewer rarely seeks the negative space but throughout Whiteread's portfolio it is impossible to avoid the conceptualisation.

The negative space of a room is referred to as *ma* in Japan as it is described as the “space between the walls” (Pilgrim, 1986, p. 255), and in the case of *Ghost*, *ma* undertakes a transformation from being present in the room to existing between the cast and the viewer. The finished form of casting is usually a replica of the pattern that was cast, however, in the case of *Ghost* and *ma*, *ma* is unable to be cast as it is not a solid object, nor can *ma* be transformed into a solid object as the phenomenon exists in the in between space.

A similar concept could be applied to memories, as one interpretation of *Ghost* is the transformation of memories into a solid form. However, the room would have had to be cleared out of all possessions before the casting processes and what is left is simply four walls which resulted in a white cast of a room. For the previous occupants, it is doubted that they will interpret this room as a representation of their memories due to the lack of objects and the uneasy feeling that is emitted from this white form. Indeed, spaces are closely associated with a person’s sense of self but without the possessions and the features that make a space personal, the individual will struggle to identify with the room, despite the memories that occurred in that place.



Figure 7: Torso

In *Rachel Whiteread*, Elliot (2001, p.12) draws our attention to the paradoxes that lie in Whiteread’s work, noting that her sculptures tend to represent the very opposite of the original object that was cast. For instance, *Torso* (Figure 7, 1988) is a cast of a hot water bottle, however, the object no

longer provides a function and casting's traditional role of replicating an item has been subverted to cast the very thing it is not: the air. A hot water bottle is regularly used when we are sick, in pain or cold, it is used in our most fragile states and the bottle forms into the contours of our shape, however, casting has transformed the bottle into a cold, solid object, resembling a body. The undulations and the cut off neck connote a decapitated body, so much so that Whiteread named the piece *Torso* whereas her sculptures commonly undertake the title *Untitled* (Young, 2017).

A key theme in Whiteread's work is that she casts objects that relate to the human body, including a living room (*Figure 6*), hot water bottles (*Figure 7*), shelves and bathtubs (Elliot, 2001, p. 9). Elliot (2001, p. 9) comments that the cast sculptures are a metaphor for our own bodies and lives, and he compares them to shadows which is fitting as these casts represent the body without physically placing the form within the space (Whiteread, 2004). The sculptures therefore connote the absence of a human presence as *Figure 6* symbolises the past inhabitants of the house and *Figure 7* has a heavy association to the human body.



Figure 8: Another Place

In contrast, Antony Gormley heavily implements his own body and representations of the human form in this work, and they serve as the basis of his creative ideas. His figure has appeared in gallery and public spaces and in the instance of *Figure 8*, in site-specific art. For *Another Place* (1997), Gormley created 100 iron-casts of his form and permanently anchored the figures throughout

Crosby beach in Merseyside. Commenting on his own work, Gormley states that his work stems from a “lived moment” (Gormley, 2001, p. 150) and he views the sculptures as a symbol of the “provisional nature of the human experience” (Gormley, 2007, p. 1517), and this statement clearly reflects *Another Place*. A key characteristic of site-specific art is its ability to become “part of the site” (Kwon, 2002, p.12) and the figures not only occupy the space but form a connection to the environment by acquiring a stature that many have done so over hundreds of years and Gormley has cemented this occurrence. Rather than the audience merely being a spectator to the sculptures, the figures accompany the audience and look out to the horizon alongside, adopting an anonymous identity. The viewer can therefore separate Gormley from the casts of *Figure 8*, however it is difficult to separate Gormley from the forms of *Three Ways: Mould, Hole, and Passage* (1981-82) as they appear to be personal because of the erect penis. Nevertheless, Gormley’s sculptures do represent a human presence, akin to Whiteread. However, the presence of Gormley’s sculptures represent his own absence, whereas Whiteread artwork evokes an anonymous entity.

The figures that appear in Gormley’s sculptures are casts of himself which are a product of technological reproduction. As previously stated, Benjamin argues that technological reproduction removes the aura of a piece of work, however, considering that the figures he created for *Figure 8* and *Figure 9* are casts of his body, it is argued that the audience remains once removed from Gormley, therefore they invoke an aura. Despite the likelihood of the casts being duplicates of the initial casts, for example in *Another Place*, the empty voids of the figures nevertheless represent Gormley’s body. Additionally, Gormley argues that the reproduction of the figures is part of the significance rather than a method of simply producing an object (Gormley, 2001, p. 144). In the instance of *Another Place*, the site features 100 clones of Gormley’s body and without technological reproduction, the atmosphere of the installation would change negatively due to the lack of figures.

Another factor that is considered when discussing the aura is the traditional context of the artwork. The aura of an artwork is lessened once it is removed from its context as the piece of art “has its underpinnings in the ritual in which it had its original, initial utility value” (Benjamin, 2008, p. 11). In the instance of *Another Place*, the sculptures’ aura therefore remains as the figures have not been removed from its initial environment. This is accredited to the fact that they are permanent and site-specific. In the event that the sculptures were moved to another location, the traditional context of the figures would be completely lost, therefore the aura, as the sculptures were inspired by the location.



Figure 9: Three Ways: Mould, Hole and Passage

Space is an integral part of Gormley’s practice. He views space as the place you visit when you close your eyes, and though it is a place that is avoided throughout our lives, it is the “place of imagination” (Gormley, 2007, p. 1518) and the origination of all of his sculptures. As previously stated above, Hall dictates that space is “closely related to his sense of self” (1990, p. 63), whereas Gormley suggests that space is within the self. The realm that is visited when the eyes are shut is a mass void that is infinite, a place where nothing but everything exists, and where nothing but

everything it possible. Gormley's use of his body in his work in *Figure 8 and Figure 9* is a metaphor for the space that the body inhabits, mentally and physically.

The use of negative space in Gormley's casting process is unconventional as the mould making process does not involve its function until the completion of the mould. Conventionally, a cast is created through the means of a cavity of a mould, however, Gormley employs his own body as the cast artefact, therefore, the mould that is formed from his figure becomes the sculpture (Levinson, 2001, p. 79). The method that Gormley implements is comparable to Whiteread's process in numerous ways, one factor being the mould that is created from the cavity becomes the sculpture. In addition, both Whiteread and Gormley create positive forms, however, Whiteread's process begins as negative space whereas Gormley's starts as positive. Furthermore, both artists employ moulds that are already constructed to create their sculptures with Gormley's use of his own body as the artefact and Whiteread's use of external objects.

Gormley and Whiteread both view space as a concept that needs to be encapsulated or transformed into an object and they stray away from allowing emptiness to exist. This greatly differs from Yasuaki Onishi's casts which allow the presence of space (Meller-Yamaguchi, 2012) in their work by the creation of empty sculptures. In the instance of *Reverse of Volume APM* (Figure 10, 2012), a plastic sheet is draped from the ceiling using heated glue, resulting in a transparent form. The spectator is able to view the whole piece simultaneously and the empty cavity allows the individual to walk underneath the form and admire the emptiness. This differs from Whiteread and Gormley as their sculptures evoke the absence of a human presence, whereas Onishi physically allows the spectator to exist amongst the form. Consequently, the 'space in-between', or *ma*, is present throughout the installation space and allows the existence of functions and relationships between the audience and the sculpture.

The presence of emptiness in the sculptures of Gormley, Whiteread and Onishi all differ, and can be explained using their culture as both Gormley and Whiteread are British artists and Onishi is from

Japan, and as previously discussed, Western and Japanese concepts of space differ greatly. However, similarities can also be drawn between the work of Onishi and Whiteread as both explore negative space, and it is in fact Whiteread who inspired Onishi to investigate this concept (Onishi, 2014, p. 205). Despite both sculptors casting the invisible, Whiteread's sculptures are positive forms while Onishi's are negative and potentially due to Onishi's cultural influence.



Figure 10: *Reverse of Volume APM*

Onishi process when creating the *Reverse of Volume* series involves draping plastic sheeting over cardboard boxes which subsequently leaves an impression after the forms are removed (Fischer, 2012). Onishi's installations subvert traditional casting methods in numerous ways, including the materials that he uses, the processes he enforces and the fact that his sculptures are not permanent. Traditional casting processes conventionally involve casting a solid object with a material such as plaster or alginate (Brooks, 2012, p. 21), whereas Onishi uses plastic sheeting which is a very malleable material and unless the plastic sheet is fixed, the shape can easily collapse. Furthermore, the process he employs within his work is a positive-negative narrative, as the sheet is placed over positive forms, but the result is negative. In addition, rather than the plastic sheet creating a direct cast of the cardboard boxes, it has a likeness to a mountain range and it as though the boxes never

existed in the first place. This can be compared to Whiteread as both artists subvert the traditional role of casting by creating forms that do not represent its original object pattern.

Each installation that Onishi creates varies from one another as they cannot be technologically reproduced due to their fragility and impermanence. After their exhibit they are dismantled and put into trash bags and transformed into something “outside the realm of art” (Fischer, 2012), which is an unconventional feature of casting. The aura is therefore invoked in each piece as the sculptures are unique to the assigned site and have not undergone technological reproduction.

All three artists have evolved the traditional method of technological reproduction into an artform by subverting conventional casting techniques. Each artist has invoked the aura within their work and explored themes of space and human presence. The positive-negative-positive technique that is conventionally employed in casting has been subverted by each artist, and this has resulted in their own personal style.

Traditionally, the aura was not associated with casting as it is a method of technological reproduction. However, each artist has invoked the phenomenon in their work by creating work that is touched by the artist’s hand, even in the instance where technological reproduction was employed. With the exception of *Another Place*, each sculpture mentioned above is a one-off and the casts were not duplicated, therefore the aura is invoked. However, as previously discussed, despite the casts that feature in Gormley’s *Another Place* being created through the means of technological reproduction, the aura is nevertheless invoked as the figures are of himself, therefore the audience remains once removed from the artist.

The artists have individually subverted the positive-negative-positive-narrative of casting in their work. This contributes to their unique style as each subversion of casting directly impacts the final form of the sculpture and influences the way the artwork interacts with space. Whiteread implements a negative-positive narrative within her work which creates a positive form from a negative space, whereas Gormley creates positive forms that are cast from a positive form, his body.

He therefore implements a positive-positive narrative, consequently producing hollow casts. In contrast, Onishi enforces positive-negative method of casting within his work, creating forms that resemble membranes that create space above and below. Their approach to their casting style is a representation of how each artist navigates space differently within their work; Whiteread casts negative space; Gormley views space of the self; and Onishi explores the presence of space and emptiness. Their personal investigation of space within their work is also credited to their culture, as Onishi, who is a Japanese artist, finds form in emptiness as is aware of *ma*, whereas the British artist's fill the void. This links with the original quote that began this piece of writing: "form is empty, emptiness is form" (FPMT, 2008, p.4). All artists have embodied this quote in their own manner; Whiteread transforming emptiness into form; Gormley's empty casts confined by form; and as previously stated, Onishi creating form from emptiness. Emptiness and form therefore bear a predominant influence in their work, and it is through each artist's exploration into these concepts where significant subversion of the traditional casting technique is challenged.

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Figures

Figure One: Davies, H. (2020) *Process image [photograph]* Swansea

Figure Two: Davies, H. (2020) *Process image [photograph]* Swansea

Figure Three: Davies, H. (2020) *Process image [photograph]* Swansea

Figure Four: Davies, H. (2020) *Process image [photograph]* Swansea

Figure Five: Davies, H. (2020) *Process image [photograph]* Swansea

Figure Six: Whiteread, W. (1990) Ghost [Plaster on steal frame] Available at:
<https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.131285.html> (Accessed: 2 November 2022)

Figure Seven: Whiteread, W. (1988) Torso [Plaster] Available at:
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/whiteread-torso-t15485> (Accessed: 2 November 2022)

Figure Eight: Gormley, A. (1997) Another Place [Cast-iron] Available at:
<https://www.liverpooecho.co.uk/whats-on/arts-culture-news/antony-gormley-talks-another-place-9533774> (Accessed: 8 November 2022)

Figure Nine: Gormley, A. (1981-2) Three Ways: Mould, Hole and Passage [Lead and plaster] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gormley-threeways-mould-hole-and-passage-t07015> (Accessed: 28 November 2022)

Figure Ten: Onishi, Y. (2012) Reverse of Volume APM [Polyethylene sheeting and glue] Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/yasuaki-onishi-reverse-of-volume-rg-1> (Accessed: 26 November 2022)