

# INTRODUCTION TO THE REVISED EDITION

DANIELL CORNELL

It gives me immense pleasure to write this introduction to the revised edition of *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air*. Everyone who contributed to the first edition of this publication and its accompanying exhibition at the de Young in 2006 hoped it would bring wider attention to Ruth Asawa's groundbreaking sculptures and her remarkable life journey. Beloved by San Franciscans for her work, community projects, and tireless advocacy for public arts education, Asawa was still relatively unknown outside of the Bay Area. She had remained on the margins of most contemporary discussions regarding American modern art despite a career beginning at Black Mountain College under the tutelage of Josef Albers from 1946 to 1949, and her association with such notable artists as Ray Johnson, Gwendolyn Knight, Jacob Lawrence, Kenneth Noland, and Robert Rauschenberg.

Nevertheless, since 2006, Asawa's reputation has soared dramatically, as evidenced by the number of exhibitions and publications that have included her sculptures. More significantly, Asawa's legacy has become a visible part of post-World War II art history. In 2011, she was featured in *Dance/Draw* at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA), Boston, putting her in the company of major international artists such as John Cage, Gego, David Hammons, Mona Hatoum, Eva Hesse, Joan Jonas, Bruce Nauman, Senga Nengudi, Cornelia Parker, Fred Sandback, and Cecilia Vicuña. In May 2013, Christie's mounted a solo exhibition of fifty signature works, Asawa's first New York survey. In 2015, the traveling exhibition *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933–1957*, also organized by the ICA, featured Asawa's sculpture and painting alongside works by renowned artists such as Josef and Anni Albers, Knight, Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Lawrence, Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly. Similarly, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, featured their Asawa sculpture in the 2015 inaugural exhibition that opened their new building. The sculpture, which had remained in storage from 1971 to 2007, has generally been on permanent view since then.

In another high-profile installation, the prominent gallery Hauser & Wirth opened its Los Angeles branch in 2016 (as Hauser Wirth & Schimmel) with *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016*, an exhibition of the era's most noteworthy women artists. The gallery included a large grouping of Asawa's sculptures alongside work by Lee Bontecou, Louise Bourgeois, and Louise Nevelson, establishing Asawa as an equal among these leading figures. Adding to the increased visibility of Asawa's work, the influential gallery dealer David Zwirner became the representative for her estate in 2017, presenting a solo exhibition that fall. In 2018, the Pulitzer Arts Foundation, Saint Louis, organized *Ruth Asawa: Life's Work*, her third full-scale museum retrospective and catalogue.

The number of museum collections containing and exhibiting Asawa's works has also grown. In addition to the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, numerous significant museums had collected her sculptures and works on paper prior to 2006, including the Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts (1949); the Oakland Museum of California (1959); the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (1963); the Museum of Modern Art, New York (1965); the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1966); the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (1975); the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (1980); and the San Jose Museum of Art, California (2003). In recent

years, among the institutions that have added her works are the Asheville Art Museum, North Carolina (2007); the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2011); the Cantor Arts Center, Stanford, California (2014); Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas (2014); the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (2014); and the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (2016). Asawa's place in art history is further ensured by Stanford University's decision to serve as the repository for her archives, which several of this volume's authors have consulted in the research for their essays.

The essays from the first edition of this catalogue remain largely as they were originally published. It is possible to detect a tone of advocacy in them, which is understandable in light of the need for Asawa's contributions to be more fully acknowledged at the time. Everyone working on the project firmly believed that she was a crucial voice in the history of modern art and was passionate about presenting the best case for that inclusion. The one exception was Asawa herself, who, in her characteristically generous way, always seemed less interested in her own reputation and more concerned that the contributors received adequate recognition. Rather than reiterate the arguments of those essays here, I refer readers to the original introduction in the pages that follow.

However, in rereading texts from the first edition, I am particularly struck by Paul J. Karlstrom's Archives of American Art interview (which also includes Mark Johnson, a long-time champion of Asawa's work) with Asawa and her husband, Albert Lanier, whom she met at Black Mountain College. Including the artist's voice in the catalogue was essential, and the interview helps to elucidate Asawa's decision to work at the margins of the traditional art market. Her appreciation for community and the kind of creativity that emerges out of limitation and necessity remained fundamental to her practice throughout her life. Those commitments animated her creative output with the very spirit with which she lived and produced her art, even as she quietly challenged the very notion of what sculpture is and can be. It was an expression, as Karlstrom wrote in his introduction, that looked outward rather than inward; it was a "social modernism," embracing neighborhood, community, and activism. It is no coincidence that Asawa consistently used the pronoun "we" in that interview.

The three new essays in this revised edition develop themes that significantly enhance the original publication. Authors Timothy Anglin Burgard, Colleen Terry, and Susan Ehrens have taken good advantage of the Asawa letters and papers, which were collected into loose categories in preparation for the organization of the de Young's exhibition but are now catalogued more completely at Stanford. As with the first edition, this edition owes a great deal to input from Asawa's family, especially her daughters Aiko Cuneo and Addie Lanier, artists and educators in their own right, who began the process of organizing the estate for the first edition and have continued to steward it with grace and intelligence. All of the authors are grateful to them for their invaluable support, then as well as now.

Burgard's essay begins by laying out the complex cultural and political contexts that shaped Asawa's life and work. His insightful analysis posits the artworks as a cathartic practice that transformed the emotional and psychological duress she experienced as a result of the nation's prejudicial attitudes toward its Japanese American population. This is an important addition to the first edition, extending the publication's scope to encompass the larger forces that shape human beings and their art. While acknowledging the concerns of nature and culture in Asawa's personal aesthetic, Burgard's essay illustrates how her work focused on shared human experience, which Burgard finds encapsulated in Asawa's

self-description as “a citizen of the universe.” The essay offers a potent reminder in our own moment of the consequences that nationalist ideologies can have for entire groups of people when they are viewed through the polarizing lens of prejudice and intolerance. But, as Burgard makes clear, Asawa embraced the power of art and creative discovery to champion a more humanist vision of the world, beginning with her interest in dancing bodies and extending to her lifelong passion for building community.

Terry’s contribution adds important context to the catalogue by exploring Asawa’s brief but prolific 1965 fellowship as a resident artist at the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Los Angeles (now the Tamarind Institute in Albuquerque, New Mexico). Terry notes that Asawa’s engagement with printmaking at Tamarind was something of an anomaly in her career. However, the degree to which she immersed herself so completely in becoming an accomplished lithographer during her time there sheds light on Asawa’s enduring interest in learning as a shared experience. This short period of production reveals the centrality of experimentation and revision to Asawa’s artistic process, evident throughout her career. As Terry articulates, Asawa’s prints demonstrate many of the signature elements of her artistic language as she embarked on a thorough investigation into the materials. At Tamarind, Asawa’s economy of means and interest in revision led her to reuse stones, reworking them to develop her ideas through multiple states of reflection, repetition, transfer, and transparency. The lithographs investigate reversals of black and white to emphasize figure-ground relationships—another touchstone of Asawa’s sculptural vocabulary—as she exploited the black to exquisite effect. Through her printmaking, Asawa engaged with prominent Bay Area artists and national print curators. Her genuine respect and appreciation for others is evident in the praise and gratitude regularly expressed in her correspondence, cited in some of Terry’s endnotes.

Ehrens details the long friendship between Asawa and the renowned photographer Imogen Cunningham, despite their forty-three-year age difference. Drawing on personal papers and interviews, Ehrens examines this extraordinary relationship, which allowed Cunningham to create a body of photographs that capture Asawa’s personal and professional life. Beginning with a brief description of how Cunningham forged her own career while balancing work and family, the essay relates how this already well-established fine art photographer found Asawa’s life and art inspiring. Ehrens explains that the two artists would have found common ground in the challenges they each faced as women committed to personal relationships as well as their work. The essay also explores their shared love of dance and the way each incorporated it into very different artistic modes. This reciprocal inspiration, Ehrens suggests, may be understood as if “the two artists are choreographing a dance together.” She finds their mutually influential and supportive friendship emblematic of the forward-thinking cultural values that drew them both to San Francisco and its social and political ethos. Asawa and Cunningham were kindred spirits, becoming close friends because they recognized each other’s similar life circumstances and approached their art through pioneering experimental methods in their respective media.

I end this introduction with a note of personal gratitude for the trust that Asawa placed in those of us fortunate enough to collaborate directly with her on the first edition of this publication, the 2006 exhibition, and her installation in the de Young’s Nancy B. and Jake L. Hamon Tower. This revised catalogue is a fitting tribute to Asawa’s reintroduction to the art-historical narrative by collectors, curators, and critics. I feel certain she would be profoundly pleased by the community that has coalesced around her work.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION

DANIEL CORNELL

14 This catalogue and its retrospective exhibition are the result of a series of conversations that the former director of the Fine Arts Museums, Harry S. Parker III, initiated with Ruth Asawa, whose constructivist wire sculptures and activist spirit on behalf of arts education he admired. It was his idea to install her artworks in the lobby of the de Young's Nancy B. and Jake L. Hamon Tower, in proximity to the education areas of the museum, where students of all ages would experience them. By generously giving a complete body of works that trace the history of her innovative experiments with wire, Asawa ensured an installation of the highest quality. It has been my extraordinary good fortune to be the curator for all three projects, not only because I appreciate Asawa's artistry but also because it has afforded me the opportunity to work so closely with her during many visits to her home and studio.

The catalogue is organized into three sections of essays, punctuated by two sections of color plates illustrating the works in the exhibition; the first plate section features Asawa's drawings, paintings, and prints, and the second, her sculptures. Jacqueline Hoefer's studiously researched biographical essay gives a personal narrative of Asawa's background and family life that reveals the resolve with which she confronted and overcame serious obstacles as a Japanese American in order to become an artist of national renown. It also offers an account of Asawa's public sculptures, whose site-specific condition meant they could not be part of the retrospective. An accomplished poet, Hoefer wrote in a style that reflects a crisp attention to language, which is the perfect linguistic complement to Asawa's sculptural lexicon. Sadly, Hoefer passed away as the volume was being completed, but not before the final edits to her manuscript. Everyone on the project fondly remembers her passionate belief that art played a significant role in changing how people approached the world, a sensibility that mirrored Asawa's own and guaranteed their long friendship.

Karin Higa uses the visual syntax of Asawa's sculptures to explain the guiding principle of the artist's life as it relates to her working method. Higa suggests how the duality of something that is simultaneously inside and outside provides a metaphoric understanding of Asawa's own negotiations as she navigated her early experiences—her childhood on the family farm and in California's progressive schools, her internment in the Japanese American camp at Rowher, Arkansas, and her resident student life at Milwaukee State Teachers College and Black Mountain College. Higa demonstrates the multiplicity of ways Asawa's heritage has influenced her life, expanding the limited set of assumptions often used in discussing an artist's background and ancestry.

This first section concludes with Mary Emma Harris's essay on the pedagogical program Asawa undertook at Black Mountain College, near Asheville, North Carolina. One of the principal historians of the college, Harris is uniquely positioned to discuss Asawa's work in light of the school's curriculum and to elaborate on the community of influential artists and famous teachers with whom she studied, especially Josef Albers, Max Wilhelm Dehn, Buckminster Fuller, and Merce Cunningham. Harris's discussion of specific works that Asawa created under Albers's mentorship provides an important lens for understanding her drawings, paintings, and prints in the illustrated section that immediately follows the essay.

The second section of essays focuses on Asawa's most significant contribution to modern art—her invention of a sculptural vocabulary based on the open and closed structures

of her looped- and tied-wire forms. Readers are introduced to Asawa's voice, along with that of her husband and lifelong confidant, Albert Lanier, through an interview conducted by American art historian Paul J. Karlstrom in 2002 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This exchange focuses on the artist's understanding of her role in the history of American modernism, especially as it relates to her Black Mountain experience and the influence of conceptual ideas and design principles from the Bauhaus on her wire sculptures.

15

Emily K. Doman Jennings's essay provides a close reading of the early critical reception of Asawa's sculptures, noting the tendency to view the work through the lens of her ethnicity or gender in ways that distorts their interpretation. Doman Jennings's reconsideration of Asawa's work in light of the aesthetic principles of László Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus extends the analysis in other essays based on the artist's relationship with Albers, positioning her within the broader historical trends of European modernism and a constructivist aesthetic of interrelated forms.

My own essay argues for the importance of inserting Asawa's sculptures into the dialogue about modern art in America during the post-World War II period as historians reassess the role of the New York School and abstract expressionism in light of other prominent aesthetic strategies. I trace the artist's lifelong interest in how the space around an object contributes to the viewer's experience, beginning with the notion of how a line not only defines forms but also creates gaps between them. As her work moved from two dimensions into space in the early 1950s, Asawa recognized that her sculptures animate their surroundings and define the conditions of their own viewing, which anticipated the rise of installation art in the 1960s and 1970s. Through photographs taken by Imogen Cunningham, I illustrate how these two artist friends collaborated on a series of images in the Asawa home that emphasized how sculptures and bodies inhabit space together. The essay concludes by discussing the installation of Asawa's sculptures in the de Young, providing a view of the uncanny metamorphosis that her language of line and transparency create as the works interact to transform space.

The book concludes with a series of essays by arts educators and activists who worked with Asawa in the public sphere. Sally B. Woodbridge, who cofounded San Francisco's Alvarado School Art Workshop with Asawa, narrates their struggle and eventual success in convincing the school district of the important role that genuine engagement with art could have in student learning. It was their idea to move art in the public schools beyond a craft activity by developing a program that drew on the participation of professional artists who worked with students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Her account of the projects undertaken in that program from 1968 to 1973 illustrates Asawa's principal understanding of the seamlessness of life and art.

In his essay on Asawa's participation in the U.S. government-funded initiative known as CETA (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act), John Kreidler illustrates how her experience with the Alvarado School Art Workshop provided the model for a federal program. He recounts her influence in the use of this new funding source to strengthen the role of artists in San Francisco's public schools even further, ensuring a legacy for artist-based education to this day. That legacy is evident in the city's School of the Arts (renamed the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts in 2010). Susan Stauter participated with Asawa in the task force for this public high school devoted to the arts, and her tribute to the ways their collaboration continues to inspire her is a fitting conclusion to the book, which illuminates the life and work of a remarkable and talented artist.