
CERAMIC GRENADES

A reading of Emiko Kasahara's historically informed installation at 'Parasophia: Kyoto International Festival of Culture' (2015). This report was first published on gensojapan.org



Emiko Kasahara, 'K1001K', Kyoto Municipal Museum of Art (2015)

Pale and orderly, a rectangular carpet of inactive ceramic hand-grenades sit on the floor. As part of 'Parasophia: Kyoto International Festival of Culture' (2015) this subtle installation is a work by the artist Emiko Kasahara. Presented as though excavated, the empty ceramic shells call to mind the findings of an archaeological dig whose exploration has unearthed events long since buried. Sitting next to 1,001 grenades is a stack of printed pages of the same number. Collectively, they comprise the artwork [K1001K](#) (2015).

Even without looking carefully, it's apparent that ceramic chunks are missing. Up-close, it's possible to see that the sheen on the inner surfaces is glossy whereas the outer surfaces have matte finishes. One practical purpose of glazing ceramics is to prevent water and other liquids from seeping through porous vessels. Presumably, the glaze was applied here to protect the explosives that once housed inside. What isn't clear is whether these objects are genuine artefacts or if they have been fabricated to serve a historical, educational or aesthetic purpose.

Encountering the grenade shells on the floor produces a particular reading of the work. While the ground implies a location to conceal explosives, it also allows an opportunity to associate where the raw materials were drawn from initially. In both instances, clay comes from and returns to the earth, suggesting a narrative in which objects outlive the makers who fashioned them. Reviewing the artwork with this in mind, the orderly rows in Kasahara's installation appear like headstones in a cemetery.

Broadly speaking, a common strategy employed by contemporary artists is to use a material that not only reflects its subject but one that deliberately juxtaposes associations popularly held on the topic. The act of altering the physical composition of an object, or a collection of objects, is a recurring device that draws our attention to what is said by asking us to notice how it is said. Taking this into account, one might assume that Kasahara uses ceramics to show how brittle these shells are. On its surface, [K1001K](#) could appear to serve a pacifist agenda that uses objects in place of soldiers or citizens. However, these assumptions risk oversimplifying the installation and neglect how Kasahara's research and production processes have shaped this work.



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The first assumption to rectify is that the material composition hasn't been altered but is a faithful historical reconstruction. Although grenades were more commonly made from metal, at the end of World War II there was a nationwide initiative to produce ammunition from clay. All across Japan, students were given the task of manufacturing casings for explosive devices. Making use of every available resource this national mobilisation was traced back, by the artist, to a former munitions factory in the city of Kawagoe in Saitama.

Kasahara's research led her to Binnuma river, in Kawagoe, where many of these ceramic shells were discarded in the waters near the former munitions factory after the war. Upon discovering these partly-submerged fragments, the artist said: "When I first went to see the site where the ceramics had been dumped, it was an ambivalent aesthetic experience. I felt I was watching the collection of dead bodies and remains, but it was not necessarily violent or tragic, there was also a quietly beautiful sense of loss. I made [K1001](#) while thinking about the meaning of what I first saw at the Binnuma river."

Remarkably, it is even possible to determine which regions that potters sent their casings to Kawagoe in from, using the items recovered. Bearing regional pottery markings from Seto, Arita and elsewhere, the seals that typically furnish an artisan's china as a mark of their expertise came to signify which workshops had been active in serving an urgent national cause instead. As the artist explains: "The purpose of the product was such a simple, vicious one but aesthetics remained on the surface; showing their reality of the moment, that is, they had to produce what they could with what they had."

Returning to Kasahara's completed installation, every grenade shell carries the same sign that forms the work's title: [K1001](#). As well as alluding to the city of Kawagoe, it is no accident that collectively these small blue-grey marks give the impression of mass-produced porcelain ceramics. In doing so, Kasahara contrasts the position of the individual among a greater, repeatable scheme. The number chosen by the artist also reflects this idea. Whereas the Japanese military gave importance to the number 1,000, as in sennibari or thousand-stitch belts, Kasahara added one more, to emphasise the solitary amongst a uniformed whole.

But perhaps [K1001](#) is best understood by the process the artist undertook to produce it. Having acquired a scaled plan of the ceramic grenade drawn by the GHQ (General Headquarters) during the occupation, Kasahara used this drawing alongside an inactive, undamaged ceramic shell as

her basis. Using these items, she made a mould for a grenade she could copy. Once the artist had collected the broken ceramic fragments from the Binnuma riverside, Kasahara pieced together her sculptures based on the missing parts from the site at Kawagoe. In this sense, the ceramic pieces in [K1001K](#) “symbolically represent what has been missing in the history or dialogue between art and politics.”



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