

ARAKAWA Shusaku Interview

ICC Interview Series 02: ARAKAWA Shusaku

At the NTT InterCommunication Center (ICC), Tokyo, 1997

Transcript of the English subtitles

1936: Born in Nagoya, Japan

Late 1950s: Moved to Tokyo in the late 1950s, briefly attended Musashino Art University

1958: Received recognition from poet and critic Shuzo Takiguchi at the 10th Yomiuri

Independent Exhibition

1961: Moved to New York

1963: Began the “diagram” painting series using text and signs on cream-colored backgrounds

1971: Co-authored *Mechanismus der Bedeutung (The Mechanism of Meaning)* with Madeline Gins

1987: Co-authored *Pour Ne Pas Mourir/To Not To Die* with Madeline Gins

Began architecture projects in recent years, including *Ubiquitous Site · Nagi's Ryoanji · Architectural Body* (1994) and *Site of Reversible Destiny—Yoro Park* (1995)

(0:55)

As you can tell right away, I am Japanese. I don't have any particularly unique characteristics, but through some fateful turn of events, through a meandering path, I came to bear a responsibility, like a big backpack on my shoulders, to realize something like a new philosophy, a thought, or perhaps more like an idea. Would someone like this head toward chaos or become constructive? That's my profile as a person.

(2:35)

What does it mean to think?

Philosophy is something you do with words, using pencil and paper. Painting is something you do with a canvas. Making sculpture and writing poetry, too, are activities circumscribed by a certain frame.

(03:02)

Why have we been almost forced to believe in such fictions? A canvas, for example, cannot tolerate even a single human finger on it. It has no sense of lived space, of everyday space. Why do our cultural systems place such high values on these framed and fictional worlds? This is the question I have grappled with for a long time.

(3:57)

Another question I've grappled with is whether I, being Japanese, could create a system of any value. As an experiment, I attempted just this. For the first two or three years, I was completely absorbed in this project. After five or six years, I became convinced that it might be possible—a realization achieved through distance from my home country. I guess everyone thinks about

this question when they live abroad. For me, specifically, it was about what it means to be born as a Japanese person on this Earth.

(05:05)

The first issue is the language. What does it mean to think about the world in the Japanese language? How do I apply a “Japanese” sensibility to things? I decided to find thorough answers to these questions. I started it by instinct.

(05:44)

Unlike in the West, there is no model for such a thought process in Japan. But, I still believed it was possible.

(6'06": [image caption](#))

[From *The Mechanism of Meaning, Reassembling, 1963/88*](#)

That's how such a grandiose title of *The Mechanism of Meaning* came about.

(06:16)

In a really zig-zag manner, I kept thinking about these impossible questions about meaning in English—the foreign language to me—and in Japanese.

(06:20: [image caption](#))

[From *The Mechanism of Meaning, Neutralization of Subjectivity, 1963/88*](#)

(06:33)

I spent about ten years exploring these issues and came to understand in my own way what makes each language unique. The idea of bodily movement emerged, quite by chance, out of this process around the end of the 1960s. That was a shock to me. It still shocks me now.

(07:24)

So, I inevitably stepped into the field of experimental psychology.

(07:45)

In retrospect, since the early 1960s until very recently, I have been working, despite the difficulty, in experimental psychology as a way to escape from the human world.

(08:30)

What is the architectural body?

First of all, out of all the creative fields, I settled on architecture because, at its most fundamental level, it is the only art form that incorporates bodily movement into the creation of everyday living space. You'll never get anywhere unless you make use of that object closest to you, yet all-too-often-ignored: your body. So, I made a conscious effort to pursue architecture starting in the early 1970s.

(09:54)

So, why do I try architecture in Japan? In Japan, there is a lack of philosophy and any system of thought and that allows for a new definition of architecture. In the West, such a change is not easy, almost impossible. Japan is suitable for the 21st century. We think the lack of philosophy and system is our shortcoming, but when the world becomes chaotic and abstract, it turns into an advantage. As proof, I believe that Japan's technological revolution happened because of this weakness; because there is no philosophy and no system to follow. I decided to take advantage of this condition and to transform Japanese commonsense and ethics.

(12:31)

For me, the only way is to revolutionize architecture, because the country, without philosophy and system, only puts trust in facts. Everything that is imported here, like art and music, is merely consumed, just like food is consumed. For example, since the 1950s, all philosophical disciplines, foods, even one's own physical movements and life itself are equally consumed. Nothing lasts here. Japan is filled with subconscious pessimism while the western world has conscious pessimism. It is not that one is better than the other. They are different, and through architecture, I am investigating each and every single difference between the two.

(14:00)

It's important not to confuse architecture with building, which are two completely different things. In Japan, people who make buildings are called architects, but architecture is something quite distinct from that. As far as I know, there has never been an "architect" in this country.

(14:27)

Architecture is the act of constructing some sort of external equivalent to whatever it is that comes to mind when you utter the word "I." With the utterance of "I", there arises a communion of "I" and "that person". This communion includes the surrounding environment and a person exists ubiquitously within it. And moving even further than that, when you say "that human being," there emerges something close to a community. Architecture is the act of giving shape to the impressions that emerge when you utter this word "I" and the content that accompanies it. Those who devote themselves to thinking about these impressions, to giving them a form, and to thinking about directions for its use should be called "architects."

(16:20)

Nagi and Yoro, what is a manmade nature?

Both Western and Asian philosophy look at natural phenomena and then decide what course of action to take. What makes my approach decisively different is the fact that I try to create or to recreate a state of nature myself. Mount Fuji, which everyone regards as some sort of perfect specimen of nature, is something that you can make 100 copies of if you put your mind to it. You could even make something more impressive than the original Mount Fuji: a mountain that's 1000m higher than the original that remains snow-covered the entire year, right smack in the middle of Tokyo! All of the children would come to worship and pay their respects to such a mountain. If you really like Mount Fuji, why not make it? You don't see anyone tackling nature head-on, controlling it for oneself. If you did, you would understand what real use a mountain has to you. That's the approach I have tried to establish.

(17:49)

I came to understand this approach through the research of *The Mechanism of Meaning* and by distancing myself from Japan, my home country. What I'm trying to do is to create a manmade nature and to cause a shift in the ethical systems of our time. I could not care less about commonsense or conventional morals.

(18:20)

It requires me to do a very strange thing.

[\(18:30: image caption\)](#)

[Site of Reversible Destiny—Yoro Park, Gifu Prefecture](#)

What is needed is a strange, or radical, break—which is what you see in the Nagi Museum of Contemporary Art and the Site of Reversible Destiny—Yoro Park. Ideally, I'd like as many people as possible to visit those two places. The actions that occur there—people twisting their legs or necks, having meals, going to the toilet—give rise to a phenomenon that I call “architectural body.”

(19:10: image caption)

Ubiquitous Site · Nagi's Ryoanji · Architectural Body

The architectural body is a mode of behavior that will banish the word “soul” from the dictionary forever. Our bodies may age and atrophy, but the architectural body has the potential to live forever. If our cities, villages, and entire environments were created in this way, we wouldn't be able to destroy the architectural body, even if the Earth collapses in on itself. The architectural body has the potential to constitute itself in entirely different terms.

(19:45)

What is civilization?

From the mid-1970s, I began to try giving a clear form to what a Japanese civilization may be. But the more I try, the more complicated it becomes. I live in the West and people there are clear about their civilization. But, it's completely different here and, in thinking about it, my mind is split between English and Japanese, like schizophrenia. All Japanese intellectuals, such as Fukuzawa Yukichi, lived through this confusion about civilization, or *bunmei* in Japanese.

(20:50)

Then, what is civilization? Civilization written in Japanese is incomprehensible. You have to start by explaining urbanization. Let's say, in the prehistoric Jomon period in Japan, people were living inside the cave, afraid of the outside world. They closed off the mouth of the cave almost entirely with rocks and other such objects as protection, and they could only peek outside through the gaps—the blue sky, the river with swimming fish that could be their food. Only dangerous animals lived outside. One day, they thought: “why can't we live out there under the beautiful blue sky like those animals can?” One person ventured out first without any tool of protection. He got killed by a wild animal. Others saw this and the next person came up with a stone for protection. That failed. Seeing that, others began to try different tools and weapon and came up with a sign language to give each other cues. That's the beginning of language and community.

(23:43)

Even in this peaceful country of Japan, many centuries of battles for survival against the wilderness happened. Eventually, they won and rebuilt their world; the beginning of urbanization. This is the basis of civilization. Nobody in Japan has explained civilization in this kind of easy way.

(24:26)

The people in Japan with power and status used to tell us to look beyond our national boundaries. “Civilization lies outside Japan,” they would say. “Everything is over the horizon, and in order to transcend it, you will need to build a mighty ship and take your war tools with you.” But we are a nation of cowards. No one has made it beyond the horizon.

(25:00)

Japan is surrounded by the ocean. Someone, everyone, must have thought about what lay beyond that curious line, the horizon, but nobody attempted to find out. Why? I want to know why. Where did that cowardice come from?

(25:42)

The most important reason why I started architecture is to find out this reason and to fundamentally change that cowardly nature of Japan by giving the most spectacular cities and environments to the people in the most hopeless condition.

(26:13: image caption)

Sensorium City (Tokyo Bay)

Given such environments, they will start gazing at the stars from their wonderful living spaces, and they will say: "The stars? Look at the splendid house I live in—it beats the hell out of the stars." That's when the meaning of words like "hope" and "freedom" become real. In order for words to hold meaning, an environment that embodies those meanings must be created. Such an environment doesn't emerge from our brains, but from our bodies. Bodily movements cause a shift in our perception, which in turn generates new words, new signs. What we call a national culture will never emerge so long as these conditions remain unmet. That's why Japan has no culture, zero. At least this is the conclusion I have arrived at.

(27:30)

I have tried to accomplish something decisive, but I guess I don't have the guts, having myself been born into this nation of cowards. This has led to a solitude and loneliness that doesn't travel so easily.

(28:10)

That's why I'm sitting in front of this camera right now and doing what I can to communicate what I feel. I'm entrusting the future of this country to myself, not the youngsters. I can't bring myself to feel the slightest hope in either the doctrines of the past or the inheritors of the future. The only task open to me now is to think about how to bring these thoughts I've been nurturing closer to the present.

(28:54)

What is the relationship between computer and art?

Saving time and space has been the goal of new technologies developed in the past 10 or 20 years. It is not good for our psychological condition. Physics, biology, mathematics could develop on and on, but our brains don't evolve as fast as technology does. We'd be left behind. People with creative jobs especially, like me, should not rely too much on digital and computer technology. Very soon, we'll be devastated. The dimension of true freedom and hope are far outside of the digital world. The computer is the farthest thing from freedom and hope; it cannot dream. I wouldn't say there is no chance of one or two geniuses emerging and discovering brand-new directions for the use of the computer and they could do something revolutionary. But, in the end, we will be doomed if we create something better than us. As you know, these are purely philosophical debates on artificial intelligence and artificial life. Increased interest in these terms, however, is accelerating advancement in the world of computers. Let's say someone created artificial life with a computer. That is completely different

from my becoming “I”. We may create a computer that lasts forever and we may discover that life can exist there, but it will never become “you”. What is the point of making such a thing? Instead, what our physical movement creates is always an extension of our bodies and it is always created communally. I have so much more hope in that kind of creation.

Source: ICC Open Video Archive (<https://hive.ntticc.or.jp/contents/interview/arakawa>)
ARAKAWA Shusaku Interview, at the NTT InterCommunication Center (ICC), Tokyo, 1997. 33 minutes 52 seconds. English subtitles by *Reversible Destiny* Foundation and ARAKAWA+GINS Tokyo Office, 2020

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