
Arakawa

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Tokyo, August 2010

Linda and I remained shocked by the news of Arakawa's death last May, roughly a decade since we met him and Madeline Gins in 2001. In this memorial essay I am going to work backwards, chronologically, and in the writing do something of an interpersonal account of his impact upon my own thinking and philosophy. This was Linda's first trip to Japan. I had been attending the joint meetings of the Social Studies of Science and the Japanese Society for Science and Technology Studies. In spite of the hot and humid weather, we tried to get in some of the sights and (air conditioned) sites of importance and these included the National Museum of Modern Art which included displays of important Japanese artists by chronological periods. Linda wondered if Arakawa would be included—and, yes, for the 20th century there was *a whole room of Arakawa*, beginning with a memorial note of his passing. Most of the art was from his conceptualist period in the 60's and through the 80's, but there were none of his more recent brightly colored architectural designs. Nevertheless we both felt this was a respectful and proper sort of "goodbye experience". Arakawa had become a famous artistic ancestor whose memorial we had now visited. We expressed this to others and soon a number of our international, post phenomenological friends from Belgium, Denmark, and the US, also visited this museum with a similar experience.

Philadelphia, 2008

There have been a significant number of retrospectives and also international conferences on the impact of Arakawa and Gins and their project of Reversible

Destiny. At this occasion my paper, “Arakawa and Gins and ‘the Philosopher’s Cat,’” noted that this was my fifth presentation on the impact of their work. By this time, the focus of Arakawa had become architecture. His famous park in Japan, some Japanese apartments and Bioscleve House on Long Island existed as material objects, earlier depicted in bright, colored drawings. The Arakawa and Gins approach now entailed full *embodiment* engagement as I would call it. The architectural constructions were built in such a way that one’s ordinary or ‘normal’ movements were placed into demands to re-perceive, re-orient, actively having to undertake more unusual and more extreme styles of motility. That was why I was playfully introducing the philosopher’s cat – Bioscleve House would be a great playroom for cats! The uneven floors, the different levels for jumping, the very obstructions placed before humans, would for cats be an excellent climbing, jumping and hiding architecture. For humans such architecture demands exercise, challenges for bodily activity such that while one is still able to do this, one pushes back destiny.

Paris, 2005

This was an important international conference on the work of Arakawa and Gins with many interesting attendees and participants. My paper there was “Phenomenology in the Work of Arakawa and Gins,” and was my most detailed response to them. Although Arakawa had spent his youth and early art training in Japan – with an exceedingly tough post-war set of experiences – he moved to the U.S. and then also time in Europe, from 1961. The Arakawa-Gins collaborations combined Madeline’s often enigmatic wordster skills with his imagistic skills. And he preceded me with his own insights into what I call *multistability*. His early 60’s art, often doing variations on ‘tubes’ which visualized multiple three-dimensional effects, and then later with the combined drawings with equally multistable textual bits in the 1963-1971 series, “The Mechanism of Meaning,” had been unknown to me until they sent me the catalogue from the 1997 Guggenheim retrospective. I thought I had ‘discovered’ multistability in my *Experimental Phenomenology* (1977) in which I phenomenologically deconstructed the simply bi- and sometimes tri-stabilities of classical ambiguous drawings such as Necker Cubes, the Muller-Lyer drawing and the like. So, when I belatedly saw

Arakawa's tubes and other configurations which often also have more than three stabilities, I knew he had already been there. Of course, phenomenologically, I remain puzzled as to why this is "conceptual" art when it seems to me that it is bodily-perceptual art, as active as the most active motility which animates perception. Echoing Merleau-Ponty in my Paris paper I claimed "*only an embodied being can see in this way, a being who can move, interact, and engage with things.* Depth, multistability, is a feature of active embodiment." That active, motile perceiving repeats itself in the instructions Arakawa gives in the mechanism of meaning. The arrows in maps, the deliberate arrangement of x's and dots again bring forth the multiple perceptual possibilities of seemingly simple arrangements. Later, there is the transition to more whole body perceptual motility, as with his *Paintings for Closed Eyes*. With these, the closed eye viewer stands on a sloping plane, in a state of semi-imbalance which, unless corrected for, could allow the viewer to topple over. Similarly, *Perceptual Landing Sites*, engage embodiment in a similar challenge.

New York, 2001

We now back to the beginning. Sometime after the Fordham-hosted Heidegger Conference, I received a book in my philosophy office, mailed from a Houston Street address, no note, no letter, but a catalogue from the 1997 Guggenheim retrospective on Arakawa. Curious, I wrote a note back to the body foundation and address and not long after got a telephone call from Madeline Gins—she reminded me that we had met, on an elevator at Fordham, during the Heidegger Conference. By this time I had experienced the "aha experiences" of recognizing the multistabilities of Arakawa's images. Thereafter began a series of lunches, at first in New York, with book exchanges. Luckily for me, I had enough to match those coming from Madeline and Arakawa. And a year later, also following the emphasis upon embodiment evidenced in their notion of "architectural body," my *Bodies in Technology* (2002) came out. Over the years we continued to meet, sometimes at their place on Houston Street, often in restaurants—especially memorable one night in a blizzard in a Japanese owned hotel—then later they also visited us on Long Island. It was a night of a full moon over the cove, and Arakawa full of fun, explored the outdoors with a flashlight. During this time I

felt that Arakawa and I had a certain affinity of often unspoken kind. Madeline remained the wordster, the books show much more her voice, and Arakawa 'spoke' a more gestural language, a body language. I well remember his delight and bodily gestural response to my discussion of at least three ways to play the variety of flutes from a variety of human orifices, and the laughter enjoyed by all. There were also various gallery events, round tables, sometimes with Arthur Danto, another philosopher colleague long known to me and clearly he, recognized as a major art theorist and critic, added to the richness of discussion.

Sept. 26, 2010 (Today)

Now, back from Japan, into the fall term, and now remembering myself how once I had done some art. As a graduate student, I painted on the side, then mostly inspired by impressionism, pointillism, expressionism, I worked in oils with palette knife. And now, only a few years ago, I began to feel again a need to express myself more visually, more bodily, this time with different inspirations from those whom I call 'constructionists' such as Warhol and Richter. So now with only a couple of years before retirement, I have begun the construction of an addition to our house in Vermont which will include a brightly windowed studio. My question to myself is: can I simultaneously still ply my own wordster abilities in writing, while also engaging in painting, now in a new vein? This, too, resonates with the decade with Arakawa and Gins. The resonance is a matter of perceiving the world, interacting with the world in a certain way.