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# Trajectory of ARAKAWA

## Shusaku:

From *Kan-Oké* (Coffin) to the *Reversible Destiny Lofts*

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In memory of our ARAKAWA, who passed away May 19, 2010 in New York City at the age of 73 . [1]

### **Foreword - from the Reversible Destiny Lofts, Tokyo:**

Welcome to the Reversible Destiny Lofts in Tokyo. From this unique architecture created by Arakawa & Gins in 2005, that you couldn't find anywhere else in the world except their Bioscleave House in New York constructed in 2008, I will send my message at the occasion of our AG 3.

The purpose of my article is to review Arakawa's trajectory from his *Kan-Oké* (Coffin) series in late 50s and early 60s, to the monumental *Lofts* at the debut of the 21st century. Before entering upon the main subject of my article, I would like to refer to a very personal experience of myself - my first encounter with Arakawa in October 1993.

I got the chance [to meet Arakawa] at the occasion of a convention simply named *Conference of the Architects and Designers*, but, in fact, this meeting was a gigantesque demonstration sponsored by big construction companies boasting

their highest profits (we were in the Babble period), held at the Grand Pavilion for the Martial Arts (*Kokugikan*, Mecca of *Sumo*). There gathered, under the banner of “Chaotic City Tokyo”, more than a thousand of Japanese architects (Isozaki, Ando at their head), designers, researchers, journalists and audience.

The convention site was formed with a dozen round tables with specific themes; one of which I was invited as a specialist of Dada and Surrealism, to have a short speech about artistic experiments of the Avant-garde movement past and present. To my great and happy surprise, the organizer had designated my place next to that of a man whom I have never met before, but just sitting next to him, I recognized in no time who he was. Indeed, the man was Arakawa himself (aged 57). Because, as my study on Dada and Surrealism started at a seminar at the University of Paris (Sorbonne Nouvelle) in the 70s had extended, after returning to Japan, to Neo Dada in the 60s, I had seen his visage in his legendary “two shot” photo with Marcel Duchamp.

It has been almost two decades since this first encounter, and Arakawa has already gone. If this short anecdote means something as a memory of our Arakawa to the dear readers of my article, it would be beyond my modest expectation.

So, let us get back to the subject. First of all, I have to reaffirm the undeniable fact that Arakawa is considered as one of the foremost artistic figures on the international art scene after World War II, among Pollock, Jasper Johns, Warhol, Joseph Beuys, Cesar, Louise Bourgeois, etc. But now, he does not use the word “artist” for his identification. He says he is a “codenologist”. This neologism signifies a creator who attempts to integrate art, science and philosophy so that he or she could realize their unification. What does it mean?

In order to find an answer to this *aporia*: an artist who says he is not “artist”, I will try to present a very short survey of the history of modern art from Dada to Neo Dada. For this purpose, I would like to choose as our starting point a small

town in northern Romania, Moinesti (several hundred miles away from the capital, Bucharest).

### A Short Survey of the Avant-Garde Movement from Dada to Neo Dada



Fig. 1: Signposts in Romania, 2007.

Please just have a look at the *Photo No. 1* I took there in 2007.

These two signposts have a double meaning for us. First, they announce the Artistic Monument DADA is nearby, and second, after these posts, Rough Road. This is a pure coincidence and not intended at all as double meaning by the Romanian Road Authority, but if you understand these signs as follows – “Proceed with caution! DADA ahead, and after DADA, Rough Road!” – you could call to mind the whole history of modern art in the 20th century.

Because, as we will see below, Dadaist revolt against not only traditional art, but art itself has totally changed the “meaning of art”. In this regard, a German art theorist, Peter Bürger said in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1984, that “Dadaism

no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution" (1999: 22).

So, why Moinesti? Because this rural town near the Black Sea is the birthplace of Tristan Tzara (1896-1963). Tzara was one of the key persons of the European Avant-garde, who created the DADA movement in Zurich, Switzerland, February 1916 at the famous Cabaret Voltaire during the First World War, with Hugo Ball, Hans Arp, Hans Richter, Richard Huelsenbeck, etc. (this historical place has been totally renewed and re-opened as a Café-Bar at the beginning of the 21st Century).

In one of his Dada manifestoes, *Manifeste de Monsieur Antipyrine* (1916), Tzara screamed, "Dada est notre intensité!" ("Dada is our Intensity!"). In his *Manifeste Dada* (1918), he wrote with capital letters, "DADA NE SIGNIFIE RIEN" ("DADA MEANS NOTHING"). We use the English translation by Madame Mary Ann Caws (2005) whose immense contribution to the study of Dada-Surrealism is well-known all over the world.

The "Intensity" and "Meaninglessness" of Tzara was combined in this notorious work of "art" (which is in reality "anti-art"), "Fontaine / Fountain" (*Photo No. 2*) by Marcel Duchamp, 1917 because, his action of presenting the white porcelain urinal at the Art Exhibition (even "Independent") has an undeniable "intensity"; a risky but, as a result, successful attack against the fine arts. This "thing" (an urinal) is meaningless except for its ordinary use in the toilet.



Fig. 2: Duchamp's Fountain (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2009)

Tzara's Manifestoes and Duchamp's urinal stand before us even now as if they were that black monolith appeared in the first scene of Kubrick's movie, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

After this "Big Bang", modern art had to pass through Rough Road for several decades, political revolutions, totalitarianisms, wars; at the end of which modern art has found its new name "Pop Art" and had arrived to a new stage named "consumer society" where everything had become a sign in the sense that Saussure defined in his *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916). Jean Baudrillard, a French sociologist and old friend of mine passed away three years ago in Paris at the age of 77. He mentioned in his *Consumer Society (La société de consommation, ses mythes, ses structures, 1970)* that everyday objects (e.g. a porcelain urinal, etc.) "have been fragmented" (by Cubism), and "having celebrated their parodic resurrection in Dada and Surrealism, they are apparently now reconciled again with their image in neo-figuration and pop art" (1998: 115).

And again, in late 50s and early 60s, the revolt has occurred worldwide against the commercialized Pop Art by Neo Dada. The situation was rather contradictory, because Neo Dada members in the USA were mainly Pop Artists, but we couldn't get into this subject in this lecture.

### **From *Kan-Oké (Coffin)* to the *Reversible Destiny Lofts* via *Mechanism of Meaning***

In Japan, the adventure of Neo Dada was very intense but very short. In April 1960 in Tokyo, young artists gathered to create a new group "Neo Dada Organizer". Among them were Shinohara, Yoshimura and our Arakawa. They realized the first Neo Dada Exhibition, and attracted a great deal of attention from journalists. After this historical event, Arakawa had exhibited his "Kan-Oké" (Coffins) in January 1961; So called because it was a large mass of heavy cement whose form reminds us the shape of a dead (fossilized) fetus laid with a purple velvet in the wood box like a coffin.



**Fig. 3:** Arakawa's Kan-Oké (restored in 2008).

*Photo No. 3* shows his monumental work, *Einstein pinched between anti-biotic substance and consonant*, totally restored by Arakawa himself in 2008.

Like their predecessors in the western world, Japanese Neo Dada violently attacked morals of contemporary society. They pissed in the Exhibition Room and walked along the Ginza Street (the 5th Avenue in Tokyo) with bandages all over their bodies, etc. As we could imagine, those kinds of events were not allowed to continue for a long time, and ended in a few months. The main reason for the disorganization of Neo Dada was the breakup of group members, and as Arakawa hated that kind of discord, he made up his mind to go to New York to find a New World for his "Art" (because at that time, he still considered himself as an "artist").

In December 1961, Arakawa arrived in New York City with a letter of recommendation to Marcel Duchamp prepared by Shuzo Takiguchi, one of the greatest Japanese critics of Modern Art after the World War II. After meeting Duchamp and, in the following year, Madeline Gins (whom he married soon after and never separated), his long process to the Reversible Destiny Lofts had begun.

We have to skip episodes of *Diagrams*, perhaps the last effort of the "Artist", Arakawa, to approach the *Mechanism of Meaning* of Arakawa and Gins in 1970s. For, it is this monumental work that had made Arakawa feel and behave different from the other artists of his time, and that has presented Arakawa and Gins to the public as pioneers of the study and practice of "To Not to Die" (they entitled their exposition at the Guggenheim Museum, Soho, 1997, *We Have Decided Not to Die*).

Didn't they write in the preface of the second edition of the *Mechanism of Meaning* like this? "Death is old fashioned. We had come to think this way, strangely enough. Essentially, the human condition remains prehistoric as long as such a change from the Given, a distinction as fundamental as this, has not yet been firmly established."

So, what is the “Mechanism of Meaning”? Here we have to look back again Dada’s Intensity and Meaninglessness, because these concepts were desperate efforts to challenge “the human condition” that requires everything that exists should have its ‘proper’ meaning. Dada, considered Meaninglessness as a necessary condition for art to have Intensity, but in this case, art wouldn’t be “art” any more.

This prehistory of the Avant-garde may have had a strong impact on the attempt of Arakawa & Gins, because they noticed that “meaning might be thought of as [...] the recognition of nonsense”(n.p.).

And with this recognition begins the great transition from Art to Anti-Art, from Death to Life, in a sense that once the pieces of Art (even Dada’s and Neo Dada’s) have been gathered in museums defined as masterpieces, they would be nothing but like Dead Bodies in the huge coffins. And only the tenet of Anti-Art (Quest for Intensity and Meaninglessness) could reverse the situation. (We use the word “Meaninglessness” for “Nonsense”, because the latter may be understood as “absurdity” which has the specific “meaning” of existentialism.) From this point of view, the *Reversible Destiny Lofts* would already have come into view.

After the worldwide success of *Mechanism of Meaning* in 1970s (German Nobel Prize Physicist Werner Heisenberg highly appreciated this work), “Death is old fashioned” has become the beacon-words to lead the “Work in Progress” of Arakawa and Gins for several decades. And, in autumn 1995, in a small town of Yoro (Gifu prefecture), four hundred kilometers west of Tokyo, Arakawa & Gins created a kind of theme park, the *Site of Reversible Destiny*, an elliptical site of two acres with a dozen of original architectures where visitors can feel their sense of everyday life changing by going through a dark tunnel without light or trying to enter into a cabin whose door cannot be opened, and so on.

As the experience of this site is limited at most for several hours, visitors have to return to their ordinary life and their “Destiny” couldn’t be reversed, Arakawa & Gins intended to extend their attempt to more exhaustive dimension and decided to build a dwelling where one can live every day for lifetime.

In 2005 in Mitaka city, Tokyo, the *Reversible Destiny Lofts in Memory of Helen Keller*, where I am talking now, was completed.



**Fig. 4:** *Reversible Destiny Lofts* (Mitaka City, Tokyo, 2006).

In this manifold, multicolored architecture whose floors are undulant, with a spherical shaped room, a circular tatami room, etc., a truly exciting experiment has just begun to reverse the flow of human life from birth to death. French Philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) wrote to his old friends, Arakawa & Gins at the occasion of their Exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, New York: “Could the body be younger at sixty years of age than at fifteen?”

Lyotard didn’t survive to see the creation of the Lofts, but this architecture seems to us as the answer of Arakawa & Gins to Lyotard’s question. In this point of

view, when we look back these Fetus-shaped objects called “Kan-Oké (Coffin) series” Arakawa created five decades ago, we might think that these “fetuses” were not dead but asleep for a long time, and that they are now going to awake to tell us “Death is old fashioned”. (The restored “Kan-Oké” will be exhibited at the Osaka National Museum, April to June, 2010.).

In conclusion, I would like to remind you, dear audience of AG 3, the declaration of our great Dadaist, Tristan Tzara in Zurich, 1919: “L’art s’endort pour la naissance du monde nouveau [The art is sleeping waiting for the birth of the new world]. ” Almost a century passed since then, and now in the *Reversible Destiny Lofts*, I really feel something unprecedented has come into existence. Is the new art going to be awakened, the new world born in order to reverse the Destiny? This is the most important question we are now trying to find the answer to through the persistent approach to the works and thoughts of Arakawa & Gins.

I hope the AG 3 Conference online will be a significant step to this goal.

## Notes

[1] This article is based on my lecture at the Reversible Destiny Lofts, Mitaka City, Tokyo, February 2010 as a participation to the Third International Arakawa and Gins Conference (AG3 ) online, coordinated by Griffith University, Australia (March 2010). I deeply appreciate Ms. Momoyo Honma, Director of the Architectural Body Research Foundation’s Tokyo Office, whose kindness has enabled me to use the Lofts for the video recording of my lecture, as well as Dr. Jondi Keane, Senior Lecturer at Griffith University, whose devoted effort has realized admirably the project of AG 3 online. At that time, who could have imagined the sudden passing of Arakawa in May 2010, who has decided categorically “not to die”? I would like to dedicate this short essay in memory of our ARAKAWA, who will “never die” in a conventional sense of this “old-fashioned” word (September 2011, Tokyo).

## **Annex**

*Document: Quotation from THE MECHANISM OF MEANING NEWS published by Arakawa and Gins, date unknown, probably in 1988. This NEWS was given to me by Arakawa himself in his letter from New York City, postmarked on November 3rd, 1993.*

**DEATH IS DYING!**

**DEATH IS DEAD!**

### **Death is old-fashioned**

Death is old-fashioned, leading scientists, and even people who are not scientists, concur. Essentially, the human condition remains prehistoric as long as death is with us. Death must die, and only death and not much else, for thus far almost everything else that has to already has.

### **Species to get a new start**

Amazingly but rightly, the construction of a place which can be used by human sensibility actively to evolve itself has received official sanction. With this, a way will be provided for a species—this species—to reconsider and rework prevailing conditions as to direct its own evolving.

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