

# National identity at Arakawa & Gins' Site of Reversible Destiny—Yoro, Japan

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This paper examines the manipulation of forms of the traditional Japanese stroll garden at Site of Reversible Destiny, a tourist park designed by the New York-based collaborators Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins. Landscape and its representations are central to the construction of national identity in Japan since the cultural distinctiveness of the Japanese people has been argued to rest on their unique relationship to nature and the country's idiosyncratic geography. The stroll garden of the larger estates and palaces of the Edo period (1615–1867) developed out of earlier temple gardens and most public parks in contemporary Japan are in the grounds of these historic sites or reproduce their forms. Site of Reversible Destiny works knowingly with, and against, this tradition. Arakawa & Gins use the model of the stroll garden towards an interrogation of national identity. Neither nostalgic nor patriotic, Site of Reversible Destiny constitutes a sustained meditation upon the instability of Japanese national identity, an instability to which it actively contributes. Through tactics of inversion, mimicry, interruption and the inclusion of text, ruins and maps of the Japanese archipelago and cities abroad, the artists are able to render ambiguous issues of nationality for both local and foreign visitors.

The Site of Reversible Destiny, and other architecturally scaled projects by Arakawa & Gins are supported by extensive theoretical writing reflecting their backgrounds in the visual arts, philosophy and poetry. Questions of national identity and the local cultural contexts for which their architectural projects are destined, are not, however, addressed in their texts. An argument for the park's engagement with national identity is inferred from the form and experience of the park and from preceding projects by the artists in Japan which do make more pointed reference to specific gardens and Japanese architectural icons. In a previous project, Ubiquitous Site—Nagi's Ryonanji (1992–1994), the famous dry stone garden at Ryonji is replicated twice in a strange mirroring inside a cylinder 20 metres long and 10 metres in diameter.<sup>1</sup> Site of Reversible Destiny does not reproduce a specific garden as does Ubiquitous Site and perhaps for this reason, its more generalised reference to the Japanese stroll garden has been overlooked.

Site of Reversible Destiny has become better known for its more controversial attack on the finitude of the embodied subject. The park is the first in a series devoted to 'reversing destiny' to be realised. 'Reversing destiny' refers to their ambition to create environmental mechanisms for achieving immortality. The artists intend the physical and perceptual disorientation of their audiences in the

belief that this can lead to fundamental changes in mental habits, including the habit of dying. These ambitions and their arguments for initiating bodily change through environments have been evaluated primarily through the discourses and themes of contemporary art and philosophy. Most commentators view the development of their architecturally scaled projects in terms of the artists' earlier engagement with the tenets of Conceptual Art.<sup>2</sup> Critics have pointed to the links between their current preoccupation with perception and bodily habits and previous experiments with conceptual conundrums and physical disruption: the first found in the series of paintings, *The Mechanism of Meaning* (1963–1973) and the second in the ramps from which the *Paintings for Closed Eyes* (1989–90) are viewed.



Figure 1: View of Site of Reversible Destiny from the rim of the bowl.  
Photograph: © Sandra Kaji-O'Grady, 2001.

Arakawa & Gins deny continuity with their earlier projects and regard their current occupation as architects, although their work continues to gain exposure in gallery settings and art critical discourse. Occupying 18100 square metres and with a construction cost of over fourteen million US dollars in 1995, Site of Reversible Destiny is a significant project for the artists and something of a watershed in their careers. It has led to other architectural commissions and larger experiments at the scale of the city and has gained them considerable architectural press. The park has, however, been feted in the architectural media not for its formal contribution to landscape or architecture, but for the provocative rhetoric which motivates their recent work. Arakawa & Gins claim that architecture is for them simply a medium, not a subject. By this they mean that they are not interested in architectural history and its forms or language, nor in the principles they perceive governing previous architecture such as dwelling, stability and aesthetic beauty.<sup>3</sup> Theoretical arguments developed in philosophy have led them to consider architecture the necessary and strategic vehicle for

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carrying out their ambitions. Commentators have obliged by emphasising the intentions guiding the work and disregarding the formal product.

Philosophers, including Jean-Francois Lyotard, Andrew Benjamin and Arthur Danto have engaged with their ambitions and Mark Taylor has situated them within the philosophical canon. Taylor describes their work as a phenomenology of perception mediating Hegel and Merleau-Ponty.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, psychoanalyst Nick Piombino argues the reversible destiny projects illustrate Winnicott's theories of subject-object relations.<sup>5</sup>

The shortcomings between the artists' theoretical statements and the realised work—the failure to achieve immortality—has not been addressed, nor have the ways in which the work exceeds their stated intentions. Site of Reversible Destiny has been largely approached as if it were an idea, circulating in the ostensibly autonomous realm of philosophy and art, not a material fact clambered over by fee-paying tourists. But the park does sit in the context of the media, discourses and practices of landscape and geography, public art and tourism. Site of Reversible Destiny is the product state-sponsored cultural development—its procurement by prefectural government officials was undertaken with the assistance of art experts but without public consultation. Public architecture and urban planning projects are being used to rejuvenate and re-create a sense of identity for rural villages struggling to survive the changing economic structure of Japan.

Site of Reversible Destiny is targeted at the domestic tourist industry, particularly the day-tripper and group tour. Officials claim 50000 people visit each month, making the park a success story and model for other prefectures.<sup>6</sup> For Gifu though, the project is required to do more than attract visitors—it is charged with enhancing the image of the prefecture within the nation. The countryside is perceived on the one hand as a place of ignorance and, on the other hand, as a symbol of purity and essential Japanese-ness, uncorrupted by the city, modernity and the West. The difficult task for Gifu, the second most forested of the forty-seven prefectures and one of the least densely populated, lies in preserving its image of purity whilst contesting charges of backwardness. Site of Reversible Destiny features on Gifu's official website under 'Sightseeing and Culture' along with two museums, an historic building, a holistic health resort, water eco park and flower park.<sup>7</sup> The last three sites all promote the 'natural' qualities of the region. Site of Reversible Destiny differs in that, as an authored landscape by artists of international renown, it unites 'high art' and the outdoors. It pursues landscape as a medium of cultural expression.

The artists have referred to Site of Reversible Destiny as the 'theme park of the soul.' In the sense that its development is not primarily motivated by profit and it remains unencumbered by promotional products and tourist facilities, Site of Reversible Destiny differs from other theme parks, yet it is interesting to compare it with other theme parks in Japan, of which there are many. Where these are 'themed' according to nation, be it Japanese or other, they are invariably devoted to the nostalgic restoration of mythical national character. 'Huis ten Bosch' (1992) on Omura Bay, Sasebo City, Nagasaki, for example, is a theme park and resort designed to replicate an entire seventeenth century Dutch village and consists of 150 buildings including a palace and several windmills, 6

kilometres of canal and 400000 trees. Site of Reversible Destiny does not traffic in the nostalgia of theme parks and it is tempting to think that it is more able to take a critical position because of its status as a public art project. However, the tackling of issues of identity and difference is no more common in Japanese public art projects than they are in commercial projects. Sokichi Sugimora, director of the Public Art Research Institute observes that in the culturally diverse United States, public space is contested and public art, accordingly, must engage with the politics of identity, difference and community.<sup>8</sup> He notes that this is not the case in Japan because it has a homogenous population and public consultation is almost unheard of. That Site of Reversible Destiny is able to raise national identity as a troubling question, rather than a benign given, is a testament to the artists' ability to render the puzzling and complex in familiar and accessible ways. It perhaps also reflects an increasing willingness to accept different identity positions within Japanese society.

### Landscape and National Identity in Japan

The past two decades have seen increasing intensity and uncertainty around cultural identity in Japan. There has been a new wave of foreigners and an increase in Japanese leaving abroad with the consequences, Gavan McCormack writes, that in the 1990s the question,

‘Who are we?’ takes centre stage in historical and political debate... for Japan, the quest for a sense of ease with itself, its region and the world is blocked by the set of values and ideas associated with its own rise: the notion of Japan as a special land, directly founded by the gods, superior to its neighbours.<sup>9</sup>

In the face the hybridisation of culture that McCormack refers there has been moves to reassert the purity and continuity of the Japanese race. In 1988 the International Centre for Research on Japanese Culture was established and dedicated to finding evidence for a distinctive Japanese race and culture rooted in the ancient Jomon peoples prior to Chinese colonisation.<sup>10</sup> This has been accompanied by moves to restore and create the symbols of monoculturalist tribalism—flag, anthem, shrine, myth and cult. Differences within the peoples of the Japanese archipelago have been denied while differences between Japan and the West have been overstated. Harootunian suggests the image of a distinct and unified people comes as much from the West as from Japan.<sup>11</sup> Japan's economic success and its embrace of European modernity have been naturalized through appeals to a consensualist and rational culture in which individuals strive for the betterment of kin and nation. The receptiveness of Japanese culture to Western modernity and rationality has been explained in terms emphasising passivity and conformity.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, the question of Japanese identity is a very complex one for both the Japanese and the West and has a long history and can only be hinted at here. For Site of Reversible Destiny it is important to recognize that notion of a distinct and essential Japanese identity is a political claim with unequal effects. It has been met by counter claims to difference by people outside the Tokyo-Osaka economic axis and those, such as the Japanese-born Koreans and the Ainu, who resent the drive to cultural unity. Gifu prefecture, and within it the remote town of Yoro, occupies such a marginal position. The commissioning of internationally known artists to undertake a large project makes a claim for

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cultural status within the national arena. At the same time the park complicates the periphery-center struggle by raising questions about national identity through landscape.

Japanese identity has been tied to the geography of the archipelago and to the mythical unity of the people with nature since the Meiji restoration. Following the post-World War II demise of a concept of nation identified with state, there has been greater effort to rebuild nation in the name of 'culture'. The relationship between cultural arenas such as architecture and gardening to the complex intersections of international economics, modernity and national image making is rarely immediately apparent, yet both have been critical, even prior to the war.<sup>13</sup> Bruno Taut's 'discovery' of the aesthetic principles of European modernism in *sukiya*-style architecture, for example, is sponsored by his Japanese architect-hosts and marries unique heritage with the pursuit of modernity.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to architecture, the garden has been used to promote and define the Japanese spirit as harmonious conduct distinct from western individualism and rationalism. The idea that the dry rock garden is an expression of Zen, for example, lies with the 1935 visit of The Garden Club of America to Japan and the subsequent writings on Japanese landscape art by Loraine Kuck.<sup>15</sup> Assertions of a specifically Japanese approach to nature originated with American visitors, but soon became an unquestioned and oft-repeated assertion within both scholarly and popular texts on Japanese gardens. The Japanese garden became evidence for irreducible differences between the Japanese and Western concept of self. Teiji Ito, for example, states,

The Western garden represents ambition attained, nature subdued. It is an illustration of the humanist ideal: man is the measure of all things. The Eastern garden and its assumptions are quite different. Man finally and firmly becomes a part of nature itself. There is no assumption that there is something better than nature ... The man who accepts nature can accept himself. This acceptance of self is something at which no Westerner can be said to have failed since so few attempt it.<sup>16</sup>

Ito discerns an acceptance of mortality in the Japanese celebration of changes of seasons and the contrasting use of frozen vignettes of permanence. The Japanese garden he suggests may be physically reduced but this serves towards spiritual enlargement in congruence with the proportions of nature.<sup>17</sup> The laborious manipulation of nature that comprises Japanese gardens might alternatively be viewed as evidence of a relationship with nature based on subjugation and indeed in the past decade there has been growing doubt about the veracity and relevance of the Japanese people's mythical relationship to nature. O-Young Lee, a Korean, considers the Japanese and European alike in their wish to control nature and thinks that Japan's economic success lies in the ease with which Western technologies exploiting nature are accepted.<sup>18</sup> Hidetashi Ohno admits,

Japanese people don't really like pristine nature all that much. They'd rather watch the cherry blossoms with a drunken crowd. The Japanese would be bored to tears in a bamboo grove with Thoreau and the Chinese sages listening to the rain fall.<sup>19</sup>

The divergence between Ohno and Ito needs to be considered carefully. It is not the pristine landscape with which the contemporary Japanese identify so much as the country's long garden tradition. Where Europe has a tradition of public

squares and monuments, the garden has constituted Japan's premier public art form. Temple and palace gardens, once the privilege of nobles and the priesthood except for designated occasions, were declared public parks in 1871. This coincides with the production of practical garden manuals, which simplified and codified the arrangements and elements of the garden for townspeople to create their own, albeit condensed, gardens.<sup>20</sup> Gardens came to occupy a significant material place in public life as well as in the shared practices and discourses of the domestic. The Japanese persist in this devotion to the garden even under the most constrained urban circumstances. In contrast to contemporary architecture, gardens have remained faithful to earlier typologies and conventions.<sup>21</sup> Japanese architecture is internationally notorious for its formal excesses, plurality of styles and experimental, often irreverent, use of its own and other nations' traditions. This is not the case for gardens, which, like the tatami room and the teahouse, remain steadfastly and nostalgically 'Japanese style.' New building types, such as highrise office buildings, railway stations, airports and shopping centres incorporate the traditional garden form developed for the *machiya* (townhouse), teahouse and palace, even where the contrast in scale and style is absurd.



Figure 2: Meandering path at Shoseien, Kyoto.  
Photograph: © Sandra Kaji-O'Grady.

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The ubiquitousness of traditional garden forms means that the departure from the norm entailed by Site of Reversible has such force. In the remainder of the paper the strategies used by Arakawa & Gins will be examined in detail. The presence of ruins and maps of Japan and foreign places will be considered first and followed by examination of their revisions to the stroll garden type.



Figure 3: Split Furniture at Critical Resemblance House, Site of Reversible Destiny.  
Photograph: © Sandra Kaji-O'Grady, 2001.

### Mapping

At the ticketing office, a pragmatic rectangle, built after the original Reversible Destiny Office proved impractical, the visitor is equipped with 'Instructions for Use (to be continued)' and a map in English or Japanese. Helmets are available for loan and, with sturdy shoes, the visitor is free to negotiate the dramatic mounds and depressions that make up the park. The largest topographical element is an elliptical depression 130 metres long and 110 metres wide sitting at a 25° tilt. Multiple paths circle the terrain and pass between several architectural follies. Critical Resemblance House, the tallest, and Reversible Destiny Office stand outside the bowl. Critical Resemblance House consists of two, slightly overlapping, identical circular areas of patterned segments which give rise to a

labyrinthine structure of walls and narrow passages forcing the temporary resident to twist and contort, all the while keeping balance. Furnishings are split by the walls and exist as fragments—pieces of beds, couches, a stove and western style toilet and bath—and have to be climbed over to get through the house. The seven ruins scattered across the rest of the site are copied fragments of this house form. One consists of the entire Reversible Destiny House given as a ruin 30cm high, referred to as Destiny House or Landing Site Depot. The others have names such as Trajectory Membrane Gate, Geographical Ghost, Zone of the Clearest Confusion, Imaging Navel, Cleaving Hall and Mono no Aware Transformer. Topographical features include the Gate of Non-Dying, Insect Mountain Range, Exactitude Ridge, Kinesthetic Pass and Elliptical Field. Like the term ‘reversible destiny’ many of these names pair contradictory terms in the manner of Zen riddles or possess specific meanings within the artists invented lexicon.



Figure 4: The silver map of the Japanese archipelago, Site of Reversible Destiny.  
Photograph: © Sandra Kaji-O'Grady, 2001.

Along with acts of naming, as if discovering new territory or archaeological sites, issues of place and geography are raised through the presence of multiple maps of Japan. Underground mazes within the rim of the bowl are illuminated by skylights into which have been etched the map of Japan. There are five maps of



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the Japanese archipelago in concrete relief. These range in size from 150 metres to 30cm long. The largest, stretched around the rim of the bowl, has on its painted surface, the rectangles of city blocks, the dotted and continuous lines of contours and territorial divisions and Japanese and foreign place names. There is no correspondence between the Japanese archipelago and the places inscribed upon it. Imagining a boulevard in Paris whilst standing on a patch of concrete in a park in rural Japan shaped like the Japanese archipelago is the kind of conundrum Arakawa is known for, yet here the conundrums are around place and belonging whereas his paintings were concerned with perception and cognition. The hemisphere of the bowl and the names of cities outside of Japan suggest global connotations. Paradoxically, the scale, repetition and central location of the Japanese map reinforces a Japanocentric view of the universe. The brochure exhorts us to “Use each of the five Japans to locate or to compose where you are” and “Always question where you are in relation to visible and invisible chains of islands know as Japan.”<sup>22</sup>

At right angles to the larger map with its contradictory codes, lies a 45 metre map painted silver, empty of the markers of human occupation as well as the traits of different topographies and landscapes. Its blank, reflective surface could indicate an act of erasure, cartographic ignorance or a primary condition awaiting occupation and inscription. It is a map that does not serve navigation or Government; its function is rhetoric, like of one of Barthes’ empty signs, it is an ambiguous and unstable signifier waiting to receive meaning.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 5: Destiny House or Landing Site Depot, Site of Reversible Destiny.  
Photograph: © Sandra Kaji-O’Grady, 2001.

Although maps are records of history and changing patterns of occupation they are primarily considered as markers of space. A more explicit marker of time is given by the ruin, of which Site of Reversible Destiny possesses several—albeit recently constructed faux ruins. The impermanence of existence, symbolized by the *ato*—ruins or sites of history, is a favourite theme in Japanese literature.<sup>24</sup> Yet it is the ruin’s appeal to continuity and origins that came to be important after the introduction of scientific archaeology to Japan in the nineteenth century.

Ruins have been key devices in the argument for the uniqueness of the Japanese race and culture alluded to earlier. The ruin has been used to demonstrate an ethnic Japanese ancient inhabitant and a continuous line of ancestry.<sup>25</sup> The ruins at Site of Reversible Destiny are, of course, neither real nor reconstructed, but simulacra referring to each other. Effects of repetition and copying, the ruins at Site of Reversible Destiny fail to deliver revelation and authenticity. As ruin and future ruin, the architectural follies of Site of Reversible Destiny are visions of a reversed and frankly fictional history. If the maps at Site of Reversible Destiny fail to provide the secure ground for reasserting the place of national identity emerges, then the ruins similarly undermine the authority of history towards the same ends.

## Reversing the Landscape Tradition

Against the ideal of a fatalist Japanese character accepting all that nature offers, as suggested by Ito, Arakawa & Gins propose a garden that acts upon the visitor in such a way that they refuse their destiny as a mortal. Arakawa & Gins insist that there is such a close causal relationship between concepts and bodily states that changes in physical interactions transform conceptual structure. They maintain that environments offering unfamiliar and disorienting experiences will interrupt the habits which constitute us as subjects, and in particular as mortal subjects. Departing from medical and scientific fantasies of a technologically achieved immortality, for Arakawa & Gins changes in the body are achieved through alterations in what is perceived, not in the adaptation of the body itself. For them, the body is not simply inhabited, but is continuous with the forms of habitation it constructs for the body—it is already architectural. They propose:

The body is site. As that which initiates pointing, selecting, electing, determining, and considering, it may be said to originate (read co-originate) all sites. Organism-person-environment consists of sites and would-be sites. An organism-person, a sited body, lives as one site that is composed of many sites.<sup>26</sup>

Theirs is an extreme form of architectural determinism and requires an extreme architecture to achieve such a radical shift in the body as site. Loss of balance triggered by steeply sloped surfaces is the central strategy. The artists' claim that:

Site of Reversible Destiny was constructed to put surroundings forward in a manner so concentrated that they wax unfamiliar; and to have the body be so greatly and so persistently thrown off balance that the majority of its efforts have to go entirely towards the righting of itself, leaving no energy for the routine assembling of the socio-historical matrix of the familiar or, for that matter, for the 'being of a person.'<sup>27</sup>

Arakawa & Gins are faithful to the modernist notion of art as redemptive. Art teaches us "how not to die."<sup>28</sup> The avant-garde tradition in which architecture, conceived instrumentally, enables the transgression of traditions, habits and conventions is, in Site of Reversible Destiny, coupled with the tradition in which gardens are sites of transformation. The tea garden or *chaniwa*, for example, directed generally at spiritual renewal, employs specific mechanisms such as the low gate and door, forcing guests to stoop, in order to produce feelings of humility. The tea-garden is also called *roji*, a word with spiritual connotations

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that means “on the way” or “while walking.” Of course, the Site of Reversible Destiny, while laced with paths, does not encourage a leisurely walk and this is its first departure from the stroll garden type. Additionally, it is not a prelude or backdrop to the ritual of tea-drinking but an end in itself.



Figure 6: Critical Resemblance House, Site of Reversible Destiny.  
Photograph: © Sandra Kaji-O’Grady, 2001.

The stroll-garden includes elements of earlier types but departs from them in being very much a secularized garden serving the palaces of the *daimyo* or feudal lords who sat below the shogunal family.<sup>29</sup> The *daimyo* used their palaces to maintain and express a hierarchy of administration through mutual visits of courtesy in which tea-drinking became part of ritual etiquette. The stroll garden is not intended as an expression of a divine message through nature but belongs to an aesthetic prizing playfulness and sophistication over religious meanings.

The staged and romantic appreciation of natural scenery is central to the stroll garden, yet in Site of Reversible Destiny this is constantly frustrated by vertiginous slopes and the resolute artificiality of the garden elements. Domes of green, for example, which in the stroll garden would represent mountains, are precariously balanced on the rim of the wall around the elliptical depression, their concrete undersides exposed to the viewer. The stroll garden is unified by a continuous winding path around lakes, through small groves and across hills, with scenic spots and buildings along the way. The path is structured around a sequence of famous sights and does not build up to a single climax. Site of Reversible Destiny is also structured around paths and places having no hierarchy or ultimate destination. Like the stroll garden it entails a radical transformation of the natural topography and persists with forms of miniaturisation and abstraction. The elliptical field, a waterless bowl, occupies the place held by the pond in the stroll garden—a unifying geographical feature around which paths circle and cross.

While scenery in the stroll garden is contracted its viewing requires expansion. Ito tells us,

It is not simply a matter of appreciating the wonders of the pine tree's shape. By looking at the model pine, all of the associations of the real Sumiyoshi Pine—the poems composed about it, the pictures painted of it—are conjured up, and the mind forms an image of that famous shoreline.<sup>30</sup>

The significance of the stroll garden encompasses its literary associations. Sometimes, as in the Katsura Detached Palace, the garden is structured around a specific text, here *The Tale of Genji*, said to have been the Prince's favourite book. Site of Reversible Destiny also has its associated text, in this instance, written specifically for the project, titled 'Directions for Use (to be continued)'. The text is made up of directions involving physical actions, such as "vary the rate at which you proceed", or that propose perceptual puzzles and conundrums. Examples of the latter include "Try to draw the sky down into the bowl of the field" and "try to incorporate two or more horizons into every view." Two of the instructions in particular capture the essence of their intentions. The first is "Instead of being fearful of losing your balance, look forward to it (as a desirable re-ordering of the landing sites, formerly known as the senses." The second, addressed to a particular part of the park, exhorts "always try to be more body and less person."<sup>31</sup>

The instructions are not as they are in the stroll garden, a foundation or structuring text, nor do they explain or supplement the work. Like the instructions Yoko Ono gave which call for the reader to imagine visual events, the audience is asked to complete the work of art.<sup>32</sup> In attempting to move about Site of Reversible Destiny as if "an extra-terrestrial", as "both arms out in front of you as sleepwalkers do" or with eyes closed, the visitor experiences a different place than the one they would without having obeyed these instructions. The visitor viscerally experiences both the mutability of place and the precariousness of their sense of self. Within Arakawa & Gins' theoretical constructions, subjectivity is relational. This relationality is not, as psychoanalysis would have it, the product of emerging in childhood through confrontation with a human 'other'. Nor is theirs the apriori, ethical and ontological relationality of subject positions postulated by Heidegger and, after him, in Japan, Watsuji Tetsuro, as the 'being-between'. Subjectivity is relational for Arakawa & Gins because it is an effect of *place* and is spatially and perceptually situated. Arakawa & Gins insist that in order to substitute what they perceive as the "old-guard" distinctions between self and object, birth and death, body and mind, new words must be devised and thus they substitute neologisms of simultaneity, such as "architectural body", "adult-infant" and "spacetimeenergymatter".<sup>33</sup> Place and subject are reciprocal and mutually interdependent. Accordingly, each visitor produces the work as a place, just as the work is argued as an agent in the construction of the subject.

The stroll garden is similarly theatrical in that the spectator and spectatorship are acknowledged within the work and, to a degree, complete the work. The stroll garden uses a technique called *mie-gakure*, literally seen and hidden, of arranging sights so that they cannot be seen in their entirety from any single direction.<sup>34</sup> The effect, Ito writes, is that, "In this garden-drama, one becomes the

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hero oneself because one 'creates' this garden by walking through it. The blueprint is there, and a most cunning one it is too, but the experience is created by the viewer."<sup>35</sup> The viewer's sense of their own mastery, of nature and creativity, is powerful, but illusory, since objects of aesthetic contemplation, such as the cherry blossom or the rough ceramic bowl, and modes of aesthetic appreciation, were predetermined within a highly codified culture of taste and beauty.



Figure 7: Critical Resemblance House with marks of mapping, Site of Reversible Destiny. Photograph: © Sandra Kaji-O'Grady, 2001.

In 'creating' Site of Reversible Destiny does the viewer feel his or herself to be a hero, even if only an illusory one? It is difficult to feel heroic while stumbling and neither the instructions nor the park are directed towards mastery. Moreover, the places against which the visitor finds their measure in Site of Reversible Destiny are always ambiguous and contradictory, at once, yet neither, Paris nor Yoro. The stroll-garden located its hosts, guests, gardeners and servants within a larger social hierarchy. Its staged transformations were according to strict conventions of passage. Site of Reversible Destiny locates all visitors as foreigners, subjects in a ceaselessly shifting environment, at once familiar and very strange. Japan, indeed any place, is explicitly rendered susceptible to the vagaries of perception and imagination. Outlined in concrete and at a scale that

makes it possible to take in all its contours at once, Japan paradoxically is understood to be insubstantial and dispersed. The park is best understood as a work that makes evident the impossibility of appealing to categories of 'Japanese/foreigner' and 'local/tourist' as essential and determining aspects of identity.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ubiquitous Site is one of three permanent exhibits at the Arata Isozaki-designed Nagi Museum of Contemporary Art and is one of a number of 'Reverse Symmetry' projects begun in the 1970s.
- <sup>2</sup> See Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Reserves of Spatial Events: Arakawa and Madeline Gins', *Art and Design*, 8, 5/6 (1993): 55–58. Lyotard is unique amongst Arakawa and Gins' critics in that he acknowledges that audiences diverge from the generic, racially undifferentiated bodies in diagrams by the artists. Lyotard asserts that Asians, "nurtured in the Zen or Tao tradition will recognize a familiar ascesis in AG's enterprise" and for them "the soul-body will methodically loose itself in order to escape dharma." My argument runs counter to Lyotard's essentialist account of the relationship between ethnicity, nationality and the artwork.
- <sup>3</sup> See Jean-Claude Dubost & Jean-Francois Gonthier (eds), *Architecture for the Future*, Paris: Terrail, 1996.
- <sup>4</sup> Mark Taylor, 'Saving Not', in Arakawa/Gins, *Reversible Destiny: We Have Decided Not to Die*, New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997, p 128.
- <sup>5</sup> Nick Piombino, 'Sites and In-Sites of Reversible Destiny', <http://www.burningpress.org/va/pote/potet04.html>, 13 June 1997.
- <sup>6</sup> Eleanor Heartney, 'Art: Live and in Public', *Art in America*, 85, 3 (March 1997): 50. It is not possible to verify these figures given by prefectural officials but the lack of infrastructure to support tourism in the town would suggest otherwise. There were only two others present when I visited in September 2001.
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.pref.gifu.jp/common/ENG/sight.htm>
- <sup>8</sup> Heartney, 'Art: Live and in Public', pp 51–52.
- <sup>9</sup> Gavin McCormack, 'Kokusaika: Impediments in Japan's Deep Structure,' in D Denoon, M Hudson, G McCormack & T Morris-Suzuki (eds), *Multicultural Japan: Paleolithic to Postmodern*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp 266–267.
- <sup>10</sup> McCormack, 'Kokusaika', pp 282–283.
- <sup>11</sup> H D Harootunian, 'America's Japan/Japan's Japan', in M Miyoshi & H D Harootunian (eds), *Japan in the World*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, pp 200–201.
- <sup>12</sup> Harootunian, 'America's Japan/Japan's Japan', p 202.
- <sup>13</sup> Nishikawa Nagao, 'Two Interpretations of Japanese Culture', in Denoon *et al* (eds), *Multicultural Japan: Paleolithic to Postmodern*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p 248.
- <sup>14</sup> See Sandra Kaji-O'Grady 'Authentic Japanese Architecture After Bruno Taut: The Problem of Eclecticism', *Fabrications*, 11, 2, (September 2001): 1–12. Also Arata Isozaki, 'Discourse on Diversity: Japanese Taste and its Composition', *Rassegna*, 76, 4 (1998): 100–111.
- <sup>15</sup> Wybe Kuitert, *Themes, Scenes and Taste in the History of Japanese Garden Art*, Amsterdam: J C Giebern, 1988, p 151.

- <sup>16</sup> Teiji Ito, *The Japanese Garden: An Approach to Nature*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, p 138.
- <sup>17</sup> Ito, *The Japanese Garden*, p. 139.
- <sup>18</sup> O-Young Lee, *Smaller is Better*, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1984, p 86.
- <sup>19</sup> Toshihisa Nagasaki & Hidetoshi Ohno, 'Japanese Landscape Today', in Moriko Kira & Mariko Terada (eds), *Japan. Towards Totalscape*, Rotterdam: Netherlands Architecture Institute, 2002, p 34.
- <sup>20</sup> Teiji Itoh, *Space and Illusion in the Japanese Garden*, New York: Weatherhill, p 85.
- <sup>21</sup> There are large parks in Japan on the European model, particularly from the turn of the last century but these are exceptional and have not threatened the dominance of the Japanese style garden.
- <sup>22</sup> *Site of Reversible Destiny—Yoro Park, Gifu*, Yoro: Yoro Park, 1996.
- <sup>23</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Eiffel Tower', *Mythologies*, London: Granada, 1973, p 5.
- <sup>24</sup> Donald Keene, *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, New York: Grove Press, 1955, p 366.
- <sup>25</sup> Mark Hudson, *Ruins of Identity: Ethnogenesis in the Japanese Islands*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999, p 47.
- <sup>26</sup> Madeline Gins & Arakawa, *Architectural Body*, Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2002, p 4.
- <sup>27</sup> Arakawa & Gins, *Architecture: Sites of Reversible Destiny*, London: Academy Editions, 1994, p 23.
- <sup>28</sup> Arakawa Gins, 'Ubiquitous Site: Nagi's Ryoanji, Architectural Body', *Reversible Destiny: We Have Decided Not to Die*, New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1997, p 189.
- <sup>29</sup> With the introduction of the Sankin *kotai* "law of alternate attendance" in 1635, a rule that required an annual six month stay in the new capital Edo, present day Tokyo, *daimyo*'s were expected to maintain two luxuriously equipped residences. While this eventually ruined them, it doubled the number of gardens. Gunter Nitschke, *The Architecture of the Japanese Garden*, Cologne: Benedikt Taschen, 1991, p 194.
- <sup>30</sup> Teiji Ito, *Japanese Gardens*, vol. 7, Tokyo, 1978, in O-Young Lee, *Smaller is Better*, p 79.
- <sup>31</sup> *Site of Reversible Destiny—Yoro Park, Gifu*, 1996.
- <sup>32</sup> Yoko Ono's "pieces" include instructions entailing physical and conceptual challenges not unlike those given by Arakawa Gins. For example, *Falling Piece* of 1964, "Go outside of you. Look at yourself walking down the street. Make yourself tumble on a stone and fall. Watch it. Watch other people looking. Observe carefully how you fall. How long it takes and in what rhythm you fall. Observe as seeing a slow motion film". Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit Juice*, trans. Shii Hae, Kodansha: Tokyo, 1993, p 97.
- <sup>33</sup> Arakawa/Gins, 'Dear Neverending Architectonic Reflective Wherewithal', *Reversible Destiny: We Have Decided Not to Die*, pp 11–12.
- <sup>34</sup> Ito, *The Japanese Garden*, p 191.
- <sup>35</sup> Ito, *The Japanese Garden*, p 191.