

INTRODUCTION

WITH MY DUAL NATIONALITY AND DOUBLE UPBRINGING, WHERE WAS MY HOME? WHERE MY AFFECTIONS? WHERE MY IDENTITY? JAPAN OR AMERICA, EITHER, BOTH—OR THE WORLD?¹

In the summer of 1988 I discovered New York City and Isamu Noguchi's work; both were fascinating and life-altering discoveries. Back home in Madrid, I focused my intellectual curiosity on Noguchi but soon learned that it was difficult to find documentation on him, particularly in Spain. I began traveling to New York several times a year, and as the city became more familiar and accessible, looking for information about Noguchi became an obsession. I was intrigued by his work and life, his eclecticism, and his continuous search for new experiences throughout the world.

Like Ulysses, Noguchi traveled constantly and never seemed to come to rest anywhere for too long. Buckminster Fuller, in his foreword to Noguchi's autobiography, *A Sculptor's World*, suggested a parallel between Noguchi and the airplane: both were born in the United States, and both supported a new era that integrated separate civilizations' experiences into a shared human history and geography. "I work everywhere," Noguchi once said of himself. "I feel myself equally settled wherever I am; people all over welcome me as their country fellow and that is both pleasant and sad for me; since I have not got a home."²

Noguchi extracted particular, evocative images from his odyssey, using them throughout his life as reference points for bringing, most consistently, the ancient environment of leisure and ritual into his work. In much of his work he reinterpreted the geometric forms of the eighteenth-century Samrat Yantra Observatory in Jaipur, India (a creation of the Maharajah Sawai Jai Singh II). He produced mesmerizing abstractions of Ohio's Great Serpent Mound and transformed architectural space with references to stroll gardens (a sequential garden that revealed its succession of views through movement),³ Zen meditation gardens, Egyptian pyramids, and the ancient Chinese traditions of the Altar of Heaven and the Altar of Earth. Noguchi's deep knowledge of traditions of symbolism provided him with many directions to pursue in the development of his designs. He referred to forms from other cultures and sometimes from other artists—the most important being Constantin Brancusi. As an apprentice of Brancusi's in 1927, Noguchi began to study his work, and later reinterpreted it throughout his own career.

From childhood onward, Noguchi was surrounded by stories about Apollo, the Olympian gods, Eastern gardens and temples, nature, and prehistoric monuments. He inherited a devotion to literature and mythology from his mother. These unique and varied associations affected Noguchi and his art profoundly. As Richard Ellmann suggested in his biography of James Joyce, "The life of an artist . . . differs from the lives of other persons in that its events are becoming artistic sources even as they command his present attention."⁴

Noguchi's life poses a peculiar riddle—a series of questions arises as one studies him developing professionally and coming into contact with others. How did he investigate his identity? What factors informed his decision to transform himself from an individual first named Isamu Gilmour into an artist who became known as Isamu Noguchi?

Isamu Noguchi (1904–88) was born in Los Angeles to a Japanese father, the novelist and poet Yonejirō (Yone) Noguchi, and an American mother of mixed Anglo-Saxon and Native American blood, Leonie Gilmour. Leonie had met Yonejirō in 1901 through an advertisement he placed for an English tutor. Isamu's father returned to live in Tokyo in

1904, abandoning Leonie before Isamu was born. In 1906 Leonie Gilmour moved to Tokyo with Isamu; in 1910 they moved to Chigasaki where she supported herself and Isamu by teaching English. Isamu grew up with a good knowledge of the natural world. He attended an experimental kindergarten that had its own zoo; children there were taught through hands-on learning. Yonejirō married a Japanese woman in 1913.

When Isamu was thirteen, his mother decided to send him to the Interlaken School, situated in Rolling Prairie, Indiana, and he returned to America alone. In his autobiography Noguchi states that he had felt deserted, abandoned first by his father and then by his mother. These experiences provoked his restlessness and constant search for identity. Although the separation was painful for his mother, Leonie felt that if Isamu could attend school in America, the experience might allow him to work out difficulties surrounding his mixed parentage. Looking out for her child, she had selected a school where the boys "learned to know by doing."⁵ In the fall of 1918, shortly before World War I ended, the school was closed and transformed into a military training camp. Noguchi found himself alone and supported emotionally and intellectually by parental surrogates, since his mother did not have the financial means to bring him back to Japan. Dr. Edward Rumely, founder of the Interlaken School, heard that Noguchi had been left alone there and brought him to his home in La Porte, Indiana. At Dr. Rumely's suggestion, Noguchi moved in with Dr. Samuel Mack, a Swedenborgian minister, and his family. For the next three years Noguchi attended a new high school in La Porte. Rumely encouraged Noguchi to study medicine, but because the young man had expressed a wish to become an artist, Rumely arranged for Noguchi, who was then eighteen, to begin an apprenticeship with his friend Gutzon Borglum, sculptor of the Mount Rushmore National Monument. This was Noguchi's first attempt at being a sculptor. Borglum discouraged Noguchi from pursuing art as a career because he felt that the teenager was not talented enough.

In January 1923 Noguchi entered Columbia University as a premedical student. While there, he met Dr. Hideyo Noguchi, who had known his father. Hideyo, uncertain about Noguchi's commitment to medicine

(and convinced that only those with a gift for medicine should practice), urged the young man to become an artist. During this time, Noguchi's mother returned to live in New York. In his autobiography, Noguchi wrote that his childhood attachment to her would never return because Leonie's decision to send him to America alone at thirteen had left him feeling deserted: "The more motherly she became, the more I resented her."⁶

When Noguchi committed himself to being an artist in the early 1920s, he decided to change his surname from Gilmour to Noguchi. He saw this identification with his father's name as essential to his development as an artist. This change denied Leonie a role in his artistic identity. Noguchi felt he had, as he later described, adopted a name "that perhaps I had no right to."⁷ Leonie's consternation over this name change, however, did not prevent her from encouraging her son to pursue his desire to make art. At her suggestion, Noguchi enrolled at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School where the director, Onorio Ruotolo, introduced him to academic sculpture.

A 1926 exhibition of Brancusi's sculptures in New York served as a turning point in Noguchi's artistic development. After seeing the Brancusi show, he applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship to study in Paris. His Guggenheim application described two important goals he wanted to achieve: "to view nature through nature's eyes"⁸ and, more important, to use his sculpture to interpret the East for the West—a role his father's poetry played. In April 1927 Noguchi arrived in Paris on his fellowship, and with the help of the American writer Robert McAlmon, he met Brancusi and soon became his assistant. During the following two years there, Noguchi produced a series of stone, wood, and sheet-metal abstractions influenced by Brancusi, Pablo Picasso, and the constructivists. When his fellowship was not renewed, he returned to New York in 1929.

After his return, two important figures entered Noguchi's life who became great influences on his career: the choreographer Martha Graham and the visionary Buckminster Fuller. At that time Noguchi's powerful sculptural portraits sustained the artist when larger commissions and fellowships were not forthcoming. "There was nothing to do but make heads . . . It was a matter of eating, and this was the only way I knew of making money," he wrote in his autobiography.⁹

How did figures like Brancusi, Fuller, and Graham affect and even direct Noguchi's career? From Brancusi, Noguchi learned to use tools and materials; he was introduced to the language of abstraction and the avant-garde and was initiated into his teacher's universal view of art. Brancusi also introduced Noguchi to the concepts of architectonic and environmental space through his own work at Tirgu Jiu, Romania. Fuller nourished Noguchi with his deep interest in science, cellular structures, modern technology, and a visionary understanding of the future. Working on Graham's set designs, Noguchi enhanced his sense of illusion, scale, and the way a person moves through space. Through his work with Graham he became reengaged with mythology.

From 1929 on Noguchi became an incessant traveler, searching for ways to define both his identity and his art. It might be said that Noguchi viewed art as his sole god, his sole religion. The next year, he returned to the Far East for the first time in his adult life. Shortly before leaving for Japan he received a letter from his father, forbidding him to enter Japan using his surname. Disturbed by the letter, Noguchi decided to spend several months in China learning traditional brush painting with Ch'i Pai-shih and studying pottery. Ignoring his father's threats Noguchi arrived in Kyoto in 1931 and was welcomed warmly by his uncle, Totaro Takagi, a Buddhist priest. There he learned about prehistoric Japanese art and traditional Zen gardens, and spent five months working with the potter Unō Jinmatsu, becoming more skilled in pottery.

After returning to New York in 1933, Noguchi began developing playgrounds and earthworks, which became the core of his late environmental designs. During this period he also began to forge a collaborative relationship with Graham. *Frontier* (1934) was the first of some twenty sets he would design with Graham over the next thirty-three years. It was designed for a dance that honored the settlers of the American West. *Cortege of Eagles* (1966) was the last set design he completed for her. Between 1935 and 1950 Noguchi would use his theater designs as a way to test sculptural and spatial ideas that he would later apply in the garden design on which the remainder of his career would focus.

One of Noguchi's most prolific periods occurred between 1949 and

1951, after receiving a Bollingen Foundation Fellowship to research leisure environments and ritual around the world. He explored prehistoric caves, menhirs, and dolmens in England and France, Gaudí's architecture in Barcelona, the art of Michelangelo as well as piazzas and gardens in Italy, the Parthenon in Greece, the Samrat Yantra Observatory in India, and finally, the gardens in Kyoto. He returned to postwar Japan, this time without the specter of rejection, since Yonejirō had died three years earlier. In the early 1950s Noguchi received his first environmental commissions: the Reader's Digest garden (1951), the bridge railings in Hiroshima (1951–52), and a memorial to his father in Keiō (1951–52).

Noguchi's maturation as an artist began in Japan, where he was linked to the culture by blood as well as by his own spiritual sensibility. From that point until his death in 1988, Noguchi searched equally for his identity in Japan and in America. His work and life developed at the margins of two cultures, where he carefully situated himself as artist and observer. He always acted and lived as if he were in exile, a foreigner, an outsider. In *A Sculptor's World*, he stated, "I find myself a wanderer in a world rapidly growing smaller. Artist, American citizen, world citizen, belonging anywhere but nowhere."¹⁰

Noguchi regarded his mixed East-West heritage as a potentially renewable inner source of inspiration, one rich in material. His work represented an important bridge between the Orient and the Occident; he liberally borrowed diverse elements from both cultures.

Noguchi's work in the 1950s marked his evolution as an environmental designer as he developed sculpture in relation to architectonic space. Over the course of the next ten years, Noguchi combined his knowledge of the traditional Japanese garden with elements of the Western avant-garde. He also maintained a successful collaboration with the architect Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, designing some of his most important environmental proposals within Bunshaft's buildings: interior courtyards and garden for the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company in Bloomfield Hills (1956–57), and sunken gardens for both the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University (1960–64) and the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York (1961–64).

Throughout his career, Noguchi stubbornly insisted that the architecture of the modern movement, typically identified with International Style buildings, must be alert to symbolic expression, sensitive to materials, and aware of the spirit in which modern architecture was founded. He believed that a world could be created in which living and working spaces would enrich the sense of self and community. His career consisted of fresh starts and leaps as he immersed himself in the process of creating a personal formal vocabulary that he masterfully retooled in the realm of public sculpture.

Noguchi's experimentation, his eclecticism, and his multidisciplinary character helped him create spaces in which the private sculptural object was integrated with architectonic, theatrical, and environmental spaces. As a result, his projects were endowed with special harmony.

There are many ways to approach Noguchi's work, all of them complex and not completely satisfactory. Each of his works is related; in some cases the relations are obvious but in others almost indiscernible. One difficulty in approaching Noguchi's work is the impossibility of labeling him. In many instances Noguchi's work precedes artistic movements such as land art and environmental design. It is not possible to explain or interpret Noguchi's art from a single perspective, whether it be the artist's background or the purely aesthetic aspects of his work. How can he be placed within sculptural and architectural traditions? Is he an expressionist? A formalist? A minimalist? A conceptualist? One might say that his is the continual adventure that is not yet finished, the *non-finito*. As an artist he attempted to create a new view of nature in an effort to reach the primitive, and so be reborn. But in the end one is left with a riddle. In the middle of Noguchi's thousand faces appears a single face. It is a face in constant search of dualities, always examining one aspect of reality and then another.

This book approaches Noguchi's landscape designs through a description of the forms and spaces he created and through a comparative analysis of processes and references. The spatial relationships in his gardens and plazas, and their architectural surroundings, are important conditions to consider. The relationships among scale, texture, materials,

and symbolism are part of the dualities characteristic of the artist's sculptural spaces. Primarily, the book focuses on his public sculptures and environmental works. It begins with playgrounds and earthworks, followed by more detailed commentaries on his gardens, plazas, and environmental proposals.

Fascinated by the world of children, Noguchi expended much of his energy in the development of innovative playgrounds. Because he understood that children view the world differently than adults, he imagined that their awareness of its possibilities would be attuned to their full and real capabilities. For Noguchi, playgrounds were akin to primers on shapes and simple functions. They were simple in design, mysterious in their possibilities, evocative and educational. Noguchi thought of playgrounds as places for investigation and exploration, where a child could go from one experience of play to another, learning along the way. They were to be places for uninhibited play, in which the spaces to be discovered must never resemble naturalistic shapes.

Noguchi's gardens and playgrounds are replete with symbolic references to concepts of place, space, and time. He brings to the gardens the mystery of the relationship between the whole and its parts, associated with a visual balance between symmetry and asymmetry in nature's order. Time can exist on two levels: the geological time implicit in the ancient stones and the time engraved in the history of humanity. Noguchi had the sensitivity to absorb the meaning of a site, its history and its scale. In his work the original reference vanishes, a metaphor takes its place, and then this too disappears.

Noguchi's sculptural and environmental works possess metamorphosing characteristics; within them appears his ever-present sense of light as a function of the time of day and the seasons. Mass, shape, and volume, in addition to a unique feeling for the spectator's sensibility and participation, are also considered. In every piece Noguchi focused on how the spectator would receive a wide range of symbols; he always took care to excite the imagination.

His approach to sculpture was based on the understanding that space was paramount. People may enter the space and then discover they are in

scale with it, and it is, therefore, real. "Empty space," he declared, "has no visual dimension or significance. Scale and meaning appear, instead, only when an object or a line is introduced . . . The size and shape of each element is entirely relative to all other elements and the given space."¹¹ When a viewer enters, all points assume a central location within the space.

Noguchi blazed many distinct aesthetic trails that have not been investigated adequately. He conceived sculpture as a spatial whole rather than as an object; he manipulated concepts tied to environments of ancient ritual and included them in the sculptural spaces. Noguchi also brought technology and new materials into the sculptural aesthetic of daily life.

Through Shoji Sadao, the director of the Isamu Noguchi Foundation, I arranged a meeting with Noguchi at the Isamu Noguchi Museum in Long Island City on the afternoon of December 2, 1988. I had traveled from Spain to interview him and present to him a Spanish project on which Juan Daniel Fullaondo, other architects, and I wanted Noguchi to collaborate. After the usual introductions and explanations, I posed my first, and last, question. In asking about Noguchi's stage sets, I used the word "decoration." Noguchi gave a brief and upset answer—he never made decorations—and then stood up to answer a telephone call. The magic was broken, the opportunity lost. Noguchi left for Italy the next

day to visit a quarry. He returned to New York a few weeks later and died of pneumonia on December 30, 1988.

The original concept of this book emerged from a strong fascination with Noguchi's work and the conviction that more information about Noguchi's urban designs was needed. During the book's development, I traveled farther west and began to absorb a new culture. I too became an outsider. Finally I settled in New York, an experience that evoked childhood memories, since I was born in the Canary Islands but grew up in the Spanish colonies of Africa and, therefore, understood the nature of Noguchi's cultural rootlessness.

Noguchi's multiple identities and his freedom from the constraints of "nationhood" define his work. The artist discovered that his mixed loyalties and his dual cultural background were outside of traditional black-and-white terms, just as his work was outside of any formal label. It is the opposite: the link between both is perpetual; one affects the other. Noguchi is a splendid representation of a twentieth-century human being. The frequency of cross-cultural peoples migrating around the world is increasing, and these migrants do not belong anywhere, but they would like to find a home everywhere. They, like Noguchi the traveler, establish biographical connections across geography, time, and cultural lineage.