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Publisher: Routledge

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Art Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcaj20>

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Bert Winther

Published online: 07 May 2014.

To cite this article: Bert Winther (1994) The Rejection of Isamu Noguchi's Hiroshima Cenotaph, Art Journal, 53:4, 23-27, DOI: [10.1080/00043249.1994.10791656](https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1994.10791656)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1994.10791656>

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The Rejection of Isamu Noguchi's Hiroshima Cenotaph

A Japanese American Artist in Occupied Japan

Bert Winther

The career of the Japanese American sculptor and designer Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) weaves through six decades of the turbulent politics on the border of the East/West discourse. Edward Said, one of the most influential critics of this discourse, shatters the most basic premise of the rhetorical context of much of Noguchi's work: "Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their 'others' that began systematically half a millennium ago, the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an 'us' and a 'them,' each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident."¹ For if we call this "*prima facie* us/them identity" into question and scrutinize its politics, then the view of Noguchi as a modernist synthesizer of East/West miscegenation becomes untenable, and he emerges as an artist whose innovative progress was alternately stimulated and inhibited by the changing parameters of territorialization and deterritorialization.² As cultural attributes of the East/West binary opposition come to seem more like shibboleths and clichés than inalienable attributes of race, Noguchi emerges as a nimble correspondent to the ebb and flow of Japanese American (naturalized as East/West) cultural and political relations.

The postwar military occupation of Japan by the United States from 1945 to 1952 is the setting of a dramatic and bitter episode in Noguchi's itinerary through the East/West narrative. The various strands of nativism characterizing early modern Japanese history had reached a crescendo with the virulent hubristic military expansionism and emperorism of the 1930s and early 1940s. This ideology was undermined by the American victory in 1945, and modern Japanese cultural identity had to be reformulated around the fact of American power.

Noguchi went to Japan in 1950, at a point when the Japanese quotient of his biculturalism was worn thin by long years of American life and estrangement from his nostalgic childhood memories of Japan. Already at this time he was a modernist of some stature in the New York art world, where his inimitable series of slotted stone sculptures had appeared in prestigious venues. But his life in the United States had not been without experiences that threatened to marginalize him on account of the Japanese part of his identity (his father was

Japanese, his mother European American, and he had been raised in Japan from age two to thirteen). For example, in 1934, when Noguchi protested the contemporary practice of lynching African Americans in a bronze sculpture called *Death*, his antiracist statement was dismissed by art critic Henry McBride as "just a little Japanese mistake."³ And during World War II, Noguchi voluntarily joined one of the internment camps for Japanese Americans out of solidarity for those who were held in suspicion because of their race. Noguchi's combination of impressive credentials as a New York modernist and experiences of alienation from European American culture conspired to make him an unusually significant visitor to the Japanese art community in 1950. At a time when Japanese artists thirsted for access to European and American modern culture and groped for ways to relate Japanese cultural identity to modernism, Noguchi was lionized as a successful American artist who could demonstrate a strong sense of empathy for the plight of contemporary Japanese artists. The warmth of this reception encouraged Noguchi to rekindle his ties to Japan with a vengeance, and from 1950 to 1953 he settled in Japan and worked feverishly on numerous ambitious projects. His position in Japanese culture evolved quickly from that of an eminent visitor to that of a leader at the forefront of Japanese cultural reconstruction; in 1952 he said, "I do not just want to make sculpture . . . I want to build a nation."⁴

One of the most intriguing works to result from this ambition was his design for a cenotaph to the victims of the American atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. Two enigmatic photographs remain of plaster models that Noguchi produced at the time (figs. 1 and 2). The unrealized monument was to be a parabolic arch with legs inflated to great girth and sunk deep in the earth. The smooth contours of the tip of the parabola would rise above grade, but the lowering of the undercut of the arch to a cramped crawl space would intensify the sense of submission to gravity and articulate the great domelike weight above. The contours of this outcropping would suggest that it was but the excrescence of a form originating deep within the earth, and a subterranean presence was intimated by light that was to radiate in the evening from an aperture in the ground beneath the arch. One would

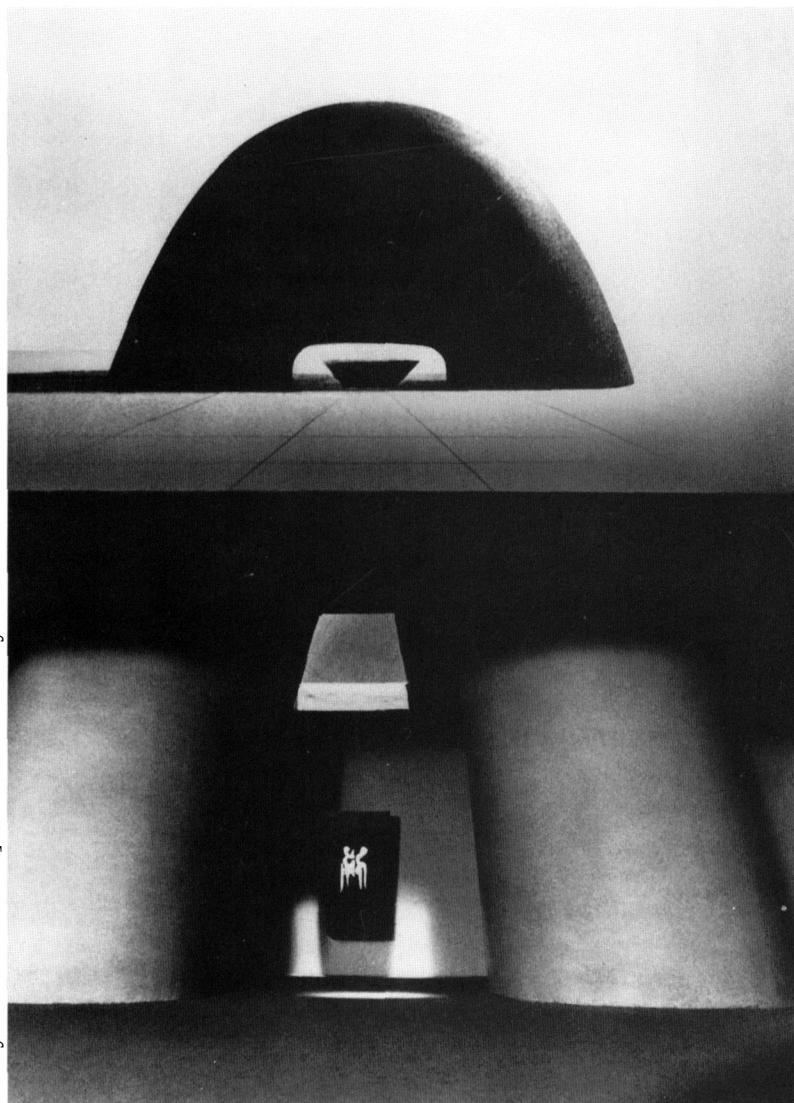
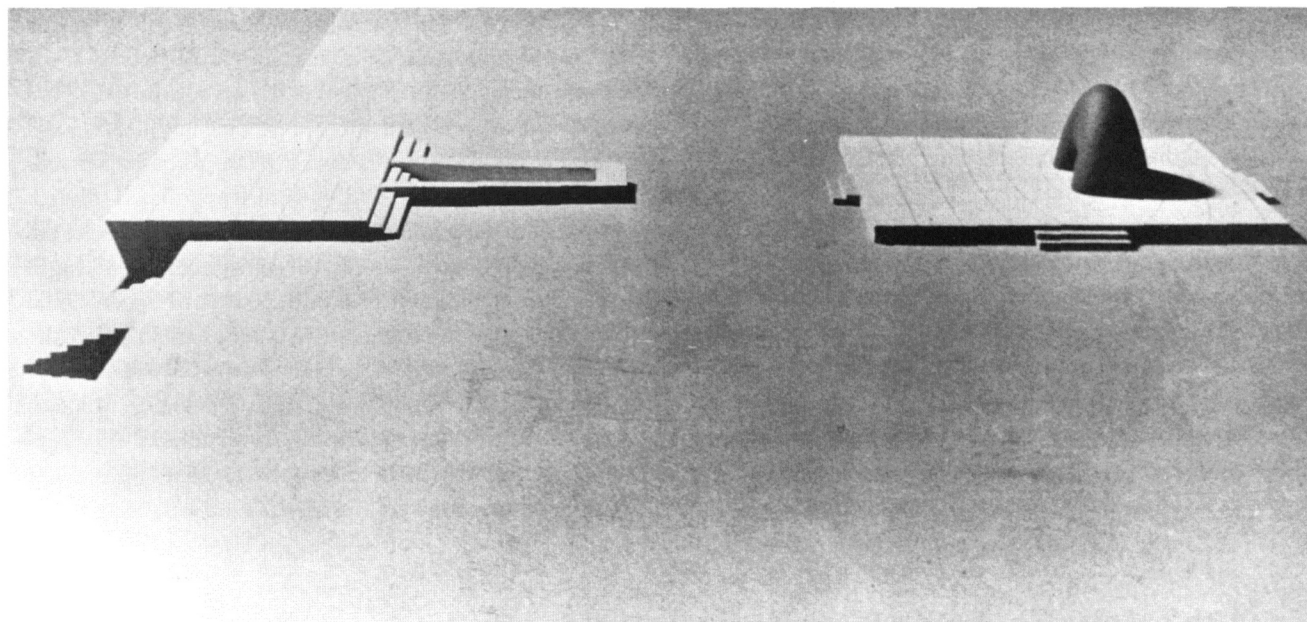


FIG. 1 Isamu Noguchi, model for *Memorial to the Dead of Hiroshima*, 1952, plaster. Photograph courtesy Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, N.Y.

FIG. 2 Isamu Noguchi, model for *Memorial to the Dead of Hiroshima*, 1952, plaster, from Takiguchi Shüzō, *Noguchi* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1953), fig. 70.



have been able to descend a staircase into a dim chamber between the massive legs of the arch; daylight would filter in through the aperture beneath the arch and illuminate the top of a granite box mounted between the columnar legs. This box would serve as a repository for the names of the nuclear dead. The monument was to have stood in the Hiroshima Peace Park on an axis between an exhibition hall of the ghastly relics of nuclear devastation and the Nuclear Dome, a prewar building preserved in the skeletal ruins to which it was reduced by the explosion.

Though the proposed monument was striking for the strong unity of the design, a broad range of allusions were absorbed into its form. Noguchi had submitted an unsuccessful proposal to a competition for the Jefferson Memorial Park in St. Louis, and the famous arch of Eero Saarinen's winning proposal is a conspicuous precedent for his Hiroshima arch.⁵ But while Saarinen's metal arch seems to fly through the air, Noguchi configured the modern engineering aesthetic of parabolic form to a weighty semisubterranean granite structure. He imagined the thrust of this bulky hull toward the sky in tension with the "ominous weight" of the "mass of black granite" giving the impression of a great "concentration of energies."⁶ Alignment with the Nuclear Dome would have ensured that it would call to mind the destructive potential of nuclear science. But the same monument that would have addressed the horror of nuclear death would also have provided an allegory of hope and regeneration. The sanctum sanctorum enshrining the names of the dead was to be "a cave beneath the earth (to which we all return), it was to be the place of solace to the bereaved—suggestive still further of the womb of generations who would in time replace the dead."⁷ Rebirth was to be figured by placing the dead in a womb.

If the chamber below was to signify a womb, the massive legs of the arch that enclosed this space would be maternal thighs. This implication is made explicit by a group of small figurines that Noguchi constructed the following year. He fashioned short coils of clay into loops or miniature

arches. Some were titled *Mother Goddess*; a single loop of clay served as both the torso and legs while the head, breasts, arms, and vagina were indicated by tiny bits of appended clay (fig. 3). These impish caricatures of such prehistoric fertility deities as the Jōmon figurines found in Japan expose the more solemn manifestation of the mother goddess theme in the Hiroshima arch. Continuing his experimentation with the clay loop, Noguchi metamorphosed the arch of the goddess into various permutations of beads—or the beads may have come first—some of which seem to wiggle against one another like primitive animals in intercourse (fig. 4). This investigation into the beginning of life associates Noguchi's project with such Surrealist models as imagery in Wassily Kandinsky's paintings of the 1930s, which resembles microscopic organisms. Yet here, as is often the case with Noguchi, we find his modernist theme overlaid with a parallel dredged from the Japanese past. His beads tend to have curled tails like tadpoles, and this feature suggests comparison to *magatama*, comma-shaped fertility beads from prehistoric Japan. The sequence of clay studies of 1952 demonstrates rather plainly the idea of a metamorphosis from the bead to the arched thighs of the mother goddess. Thus, the *magatama* may well have been a kind of germ cell from which the ponderous arch developed in Noguchi's hands.

Noguchi himself claimed that the symbolism of his cenotaph design derived from *haniwa*, the pottery models from prehistoric Japanese tombs.⁸ The *haniwa* type, which comes closest to the form of Noguchi's Hiroshima design, has a roof contour roughly paralleling that of Noguchi's parabolic arch. But more interesting than this vague formal resemblance is a certain poetic link between *haniwa* and Noguchi's project. *Haniwa* were representations of whatever the deceased elite might find useful in the afterlife—warriors, shamanesses, horses, shields, as well as architectural models. They were objects of this world transmuted into a metaphysical state of utility for the next; thus, the ancient Japanese allegorical architecture of immortality is invoked as a way to reconstrue the dead of Hiroshima into a symbol of hope. When Noguchi startled some reporters in 1951 with the comment "Hiroshima is probably the most modern city in the world," he implied that destruction had made way for a tabula rasa, clearing the blinders of convention to enable a bold modernity founded on primitive universals.⁹

The allusions embedded in Noguchi's design coalesce into a powerful iconographic program that performs admirably as a Jungian transformational symbol. Jungian thought was a vogue in Noguchi's New York art world milieu in the 1940s, and he would have been especially well versed in its themes through conversations with his friend Joseph Campbell.¹⁰ The cenotaph design blossoms when scripted to a Jungian narrative: The libido makes a perilous journey, sinking to a deep place. There God is near; there man would find the maternal vessel of rebirth, the seeding place where he could renew his life. He reenters childhood memories and

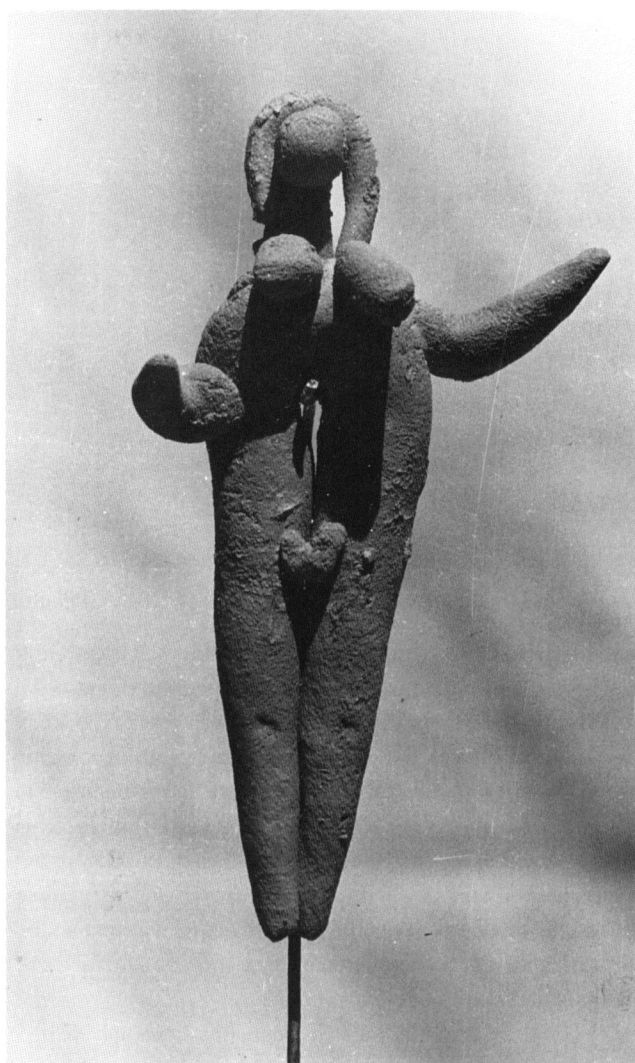


FIG. 3 Isamu Noguchi, *Mother Goddess No. 1*, 1952, ceramic. Collection unknown. Photograph courtesy Isamu Noguchi Foundation, Long Island City, N.Y.

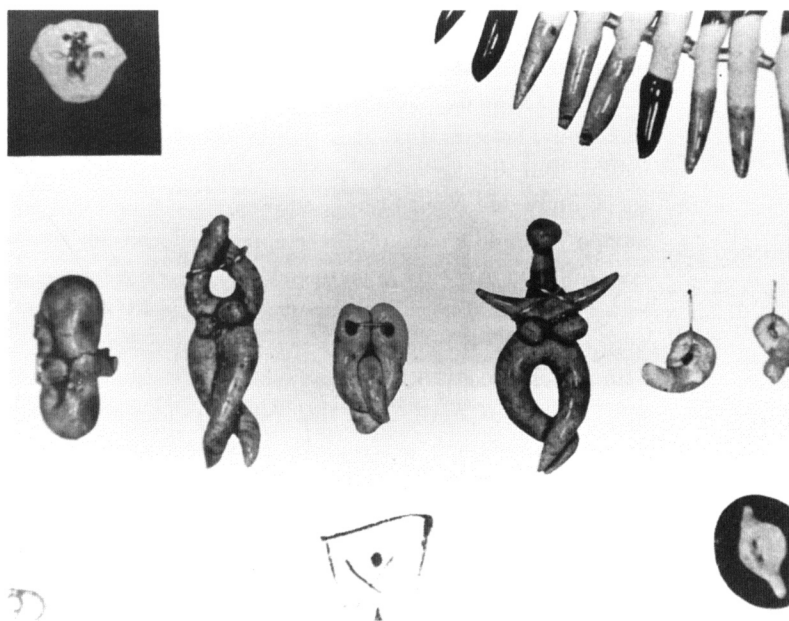


FIG. 4 Isamu Noguchi, clay studies, 1952, from Takiguchi Shūzō, *Noguchi* (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1953), fig. 29.

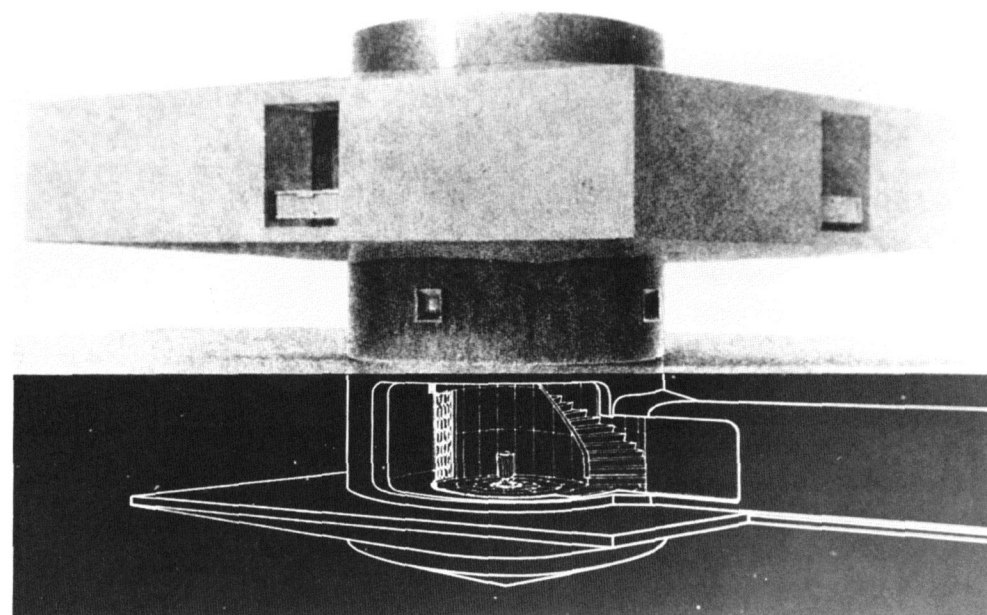


FIG. 5 Shirai Sei'ichi, proposal for Pavilion for the Atomic Memorial, 1954, from Kurita Isamu, *Shirai Sei'ichi* (Tokyo: Sanjūichi Shobō, 1970), 22.

vanishes from the existing world. He finds himself apparently in deepest darkness but then has unexpected visions of a world beyond. The “mystery” he beholds represents the stock of primordial images that everybody brings with him as his human birthright, the sum total of inborn forms peculiar to the instincts, the collective unconscious. If this layer is activated by the regressive libido, there is a possibility of life being renewed and also of its being destroyed.¹¹ The premise of Noguchi’s monument fits the Jungian sequence closely: the nuclear dead are inseminated into a transformative earth womb as a gesture of rejuvenation.

Thus, an “unpacking” of Noguchi’s cenotaph design yields two areas of interest that might be regarded as symptomatic of the East/West discourse: (1) the Japanese prehistoric culture represented by *magatama*, *haniwa*, and fertility goddess imagery, and (2) the modernity of Jungian thought, the geometry of parabolic form, the ominous potential of nuclear physics and biomorphic Surrealism. The combination of these two divergent fields of meaning is effected with such unity, however, that the result by no means reads as a hybrid. But artistic unity should not be mistaken for the social unity that Noguchi implied when he claimed that he wanted “to build a nation.” These appropriations from Japanese tradition may have been intended to encode a Japanese sense of place in a modern Japanese topography, but they were experienced by Japanese people as exogenous rather than autochthonous to Japan.

It was in April 1952 that Noguchi’s design for the Hiroshima cenotaph was rejected in a clear sign that the Japanese people, in at least one configuration, did not wish to have their cultural identity formulated by Noguchi:

I was opposed by the people of Hiroshima because I am an American. Certainly, I am an American, but my heart is that of a Japanese and how it ached in the days of the B29 air raids. . . . My feeling was unbearable when Tokyo was burning

*and the nuclear bomb was falling on Hiroshima. Therefore, I felt guilty for the people who lost their lives all at once. I wanted them to let me do the design more than anyone else. I told them I would do it without payment, but. . . .*¹²

The painful politics of identity preceded judgments of aesthetic merit. Tange Kenzō, the architect of the Hiroshima Peace Park who initially selected Noguchi to design the cenotaph, later claimed that the design was turned down because the monument was intended as a national symbol of the people of Japan, and it was thought inappropriate for people to pray at a cenotaph designed by a citizen of the country that dropped the bomb.¹³ Noguchi’s design had the personal support of the mayor of Hiroshima but was strongly rejected by the Committee for the Construction of the Peace Memorial City, without the approval of which construction was out of the question. According to Tange, a consensus emerged that the cenotaph should be designed by Japanese hands, and the opposition to Noguchi’s proposal in the construction committee as well as the Hiroshima City Council was a reflection of this public opinion.¹⁴ An essay published pseudonymously in an influential daily newspaper claimed that “in Isamu Noguchi’s blood there is mixed half which is from overseas. . . . Coming to occupied Japan where *Nisei* [second generation Japanese Americans] have clout, he spread the idea in the press that he, of all people, was the most suitable person to make the monument for the slogan ‘No More Hiroshima’—thus showing the mixed character of his temperament.”¹⁵

On the other hand, a sympathetic essay appeared in *Bijutsu Hihyō* (Art Criticism), then the most advanced journal of contemporary art criticism and theory in Japan. The author, who was from Hiroshima, defended Noguchi with the observation that “to shun a work of art because the artist is a foreigner is to fail to see the internationality of art. Should we not regard the memorial of the victims of the nuclear bomb as

a task best left to 'citizens of the world' who fervently desire a pure peace?"¹⁶ Okamoto Tarō, an artist and writer who forcefully advocated a dynamic model of tradition and asserted the universality of modern art, also defended Noguchi's cenotaph design. Okamoto wrote that Noguchi "was the most appropriate artist for this kind of monument," maintaining that "Hiroshima is already an international place. . . . The fact that the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima is a product of the Japanese lack of awareness of the world."¹⁷ Thus, support of Noguchi's proposal was premised, at least in part, on the international significance of Hiroshima while opposition was focused on the undesirability of Noguchi's non-Japanese nationality. Neither side regarded Noguchi's design as capable of representing the will of the Japanese people.

In 1954 the architect Shirai Sei'ichi took it upon himself to design an imaginary atomic memorial without any particular site in mind or plan for actual construction. His design, which was never to be realized, bears the traces of Noguchi's precedent in its pure geometry and its monumental vertical cylinder pushing through horizontal levels (*fig. 5*). Shirai's design is also analogous to that of Noguchi in its relationship to Japanese tradition; according to an interpretation of 1955 by the architectural critic Kawazoe Noboru, the atomic memorial harbors significant allusions to the seventh-century temple of Hōryū-ji in Nara. Shirai's identity posed no non-Japanese affiliation to inhibit a nativist polemic; Kawazoe dwelled on the significance of the Hiroshima holocaust to the Japanese people. "Western civilization" is the weighted term in his view of the historical causes of the disaster. Western civilization produced the technology of nuclear war, Kawazoe maintained, just as it fomented the imperialism that colonized Asia and forced Japan to adopt a similar imperialist stance to maintain its independence, which led in turn to the Japanese atrocities in Asia:

*However, in the midst of violent resistance from the peoples of Asia and upon receiving the highest product of nuclear civilization, the nuclear bomb, Japan was knocked out of the line of Western powers and it was only then that Japanese people were pressed back to a self-realization of their real Asian identity.*¹⁸

Kawazoe noted that this was a particularly bitter irony if, as some suggested, the American bombing of Japan was determined more by racism than by other factors. Thus the conclusion of the war is occasion for a "self-critique of the civilization which Japanese have received." In this destiny the Japanese are unique: "Only the Japanese have directly felt the cruelty possessed by the nuclear bomb and thus we have the strongest knowledge of the dangers of civilization."¹⁹ It was this will to Japanese cultural exceptionalism, woven into the epic of Japan's defeat, that was threatened by the notion of a cenotaph designed by the bicultural Noguchi.

With the rejection of Noguchi's cenotaph, Tange hastily designed a similar though much less convincing monument

that still stands in Hiroshima today. Noguchi's plaster model appeared in an exhibition later in 1952 with an addition expressive of his bitter personal disappointment; the character of his own first name "Isamu" appears in the altarlike position of what was to have been the repository of the names of the nuclear dead (*fig. 1*). The reasons are more numerous and complex than can be related here, but the rejection of Noguchi's cenotaph was symptomatic of a larger deterritorialization of Noguchi from contemporary Japanese culture, and he was never again to occupy a position of such centrality in the Japanese art world as he did from 1950 to 1953, years which saw the end of the American occupation.²⁰ Shirai Sei'ichi's atomic memorial was very similar to Noguchi's cenotaph in its seamless absorption of aspects of Japanese cultural tradition into a modernist design, but the nonnegotiable premise of "us/them identity" rendered Shirai's design conducive to nativist ideology and Noguchi's design anathema.

Notes

1. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), xxv.
2. For example, a suggestive context for Noguchi is posed by D. Emily Hicks's study of Latin American fiction, *Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
3. Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 23.
4. Quoted by Hayashi Fusao, "Isamu Noguchi no Geijutsu o Mite" (Looking at Isamu Noguchi's Art), *Tokyo Shimbun*, November 6, 1952, 8. All quotations from Japanese are translated by the author unless otherwise noted. Japanese names, except those of Japanese Americans, are written in Japanese order, surname first.
5. N. Grove and D. Botnick, *The Sculpture of Isamu Noguchi, 1924-1979* (New York: Garland, 1980), cat. no. 238.
6. Isamu Noguchi, "A Project, Hiroshima Memorial to the Dead," *Arts and Architecture* 69 (April 1953): 16.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Funato Kōkichi, "Mushū Noguchi" (Monsieur Noguchi), *Geijutsu Shinchō*, October 1951, 123.
10. According to Campbell's widow, Jean Erdman, Noguchi probably met Campbell in the early 1930s; telephone interview with the author, New York, November 1989.
11. This sequence is paraphrased from C. G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 408. This is not to suggest that Noguchi used this particular text; these Jungian ideas were widespread in the 1940s and 1950s.
12. Isamu Noguchi, "Isamu Noguchi no Naka ni Aru Higashi to Nishi" (The East and West within Isamu Noguchi), interview, *Fujin Gahō* (Women's Pictorial News), July 1960, 224.
13. Tange Kenzō, interview with the author, Tokyo, June 7, 1990.
14. Tange Kenzō, "5-man nin no hiroba—Hiroshima piisu sentaa kansei made" (A plaza for 50,000 people—Toward the completion of the Hiroshima Peace Center), in Tange and Kawazoe Noboru, *Genjitsu to Sōzō* (Reality and Creation) (Tokyo: Bijutsu Shuppansha, 1966), 91.
15. Shichikenjin [pseud.], "Isamu Noguchi to Furukusai Nihon no Genjitsu" (Isamu Noguchi and the Reality of Outdated Japan), *Tokyo Shimbun*, April 28, 1952.
16. Shingaki Hiroshi, "Hiroshima Genbaku Ireihi no Mondai" (The Problem of the Hiroshima Nuclear Cenotaph), *Bijutsu Hihyō* (Art Criticism), July 1952, 36.
17. Okamoto Tarō, "Isamu Noguchi no Shigoto" (Isamu Noguchi's Work), *Bijutsu Techō* (Art Handbook) 63 (December 1952): 43-44.
18. "Genbakudō" (Nuclear Memorial), *Kawazoe Noboru Hyōron Shū, I* (Anthology of Criticism by Kawazoe Noboru, I) (Tokyo: Sangyō Nōritsu Tanki Daigaku, 1976), 215-16.
19. Ibid., 220.
20. See my "Isamu Noguchi: Conflicts of Japanese Culture in the Early Postwar Years" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1992).

BERT WINTHER teaches in the Fine Arts Department at Syracuse University. Since his dissertation on Isamu Noguchi, he has continued to explore East/West issues in modern art.