The Elegant Art of Killing Yourself: The Strategy of Being a Stranger

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Given the theme "Crossing Cultural Borders," my treatment will be from a holistic perspective, that is, culture as seen from a global point of view.

Mr. Akazawa has stated that in Japanese there are few words to refer to "crossing cultural borders." When we look at the case for other parts of the world, for example, among the Ashkenazi, Sephardim (Jews from Eastern Europe, Poland and Russia), there is a word "*arkae*" which means 'those who have been displaced from their community.'[1] It is interesting to note that because the Jewish people in general have already crossed a border, they have a word "crossing the border" to describe people, like themselves, who have had to cross borders.[2]

No matter how culturally homogeneous a society may look, there are always some people who have different attitudes, different interests and different identities expressed up-front, facilitating the gradual process of the creation of new identities which are different from the conventionally and more broadly accepted ones. Let me reconfirm at once that we have always had such cultures.

There are various conditions and environments that lead to the emergence of such people. Let me take one specific example from the modern Japanese era, from one of my own books *Haisha no seishin shi (An Intellectual History of Losers)* Iwanami shoten, 1996.

During Japan's modern period after the Meiji Restoration, losers had to be distant from the centripetal power point. At the outset of the Meiji Restoration, there were people in the Satsuma area of Kyushu, modern Kagoshima, who were the losers in a Civil War and so had to leave the political world of a new Japan. We refer to this effect as "leaving the field." Some involved waited and at a later time tried to regain power through the democratic rights movement, but most chose to stay outside the mainstream. They kept to a critical stance and therefore could not rise to high positions[3].

In most cases, such people had been direct subordinates of the Tokugawa Shogunate. They were often referred to as 'shogunate followers.' Amongst them was the so-called Negishi Group, who were almost hermits. They wrote articles for the

Yomiuri Newspaper, founded in 1877. From among this group, Koson Aeba and other writers rose in the field of literature.

There was, however, another particular group of strange people who stepped out of the Meiji Regime. They met at regular internals. On their days of meeting, they would spontaneously decide to walk in a particular direction. One day it would to the North, another day to the East of Tokyo. They never decided in advance. They usually formed in groups of seven or eight people. It is said that the lead person of the group would pick weeds along their pathways and consume them without cooking. All followers then repeated the same action. They did this for the whole day. They moved around aimlessly, even passing through Nippori in the north of Tokyo and beyond. Along the way they drank sake together in taverns, and composed comical and satirical poems (*kyoku* and *kyoka*). In those days there was no heavy traffic, so they never were injured in traffic accidents. These poor Negishi guys eating weeds by the roadside, some of which were quite toxic, would all come back with red, swollen lips. Anyway, that was what they did. Ordinary sensible people could not at all understand why they were doing such things. But for them, this was how they strengthened the ties among themselves. Thus, there were some people who wanted to express themselves as being different from other, ordinary people who simply accepted their lives without raising any questions; they meant to cross the cultural border of everyday life.

The majority of the above were dramatists and theater critics, but others were newspaper writers, novelists, and painters. Among former followers of the shogunate were two men, Joden Otsuki and Kotei Nakane, who did not follow the rule of thumb about lying, which the majority of Japanese obeyed, that is, believing in the rule of the "centralization of power" or of "climbing a career ladder." Among such losers, there was no longer any enthusiasm to try to reach the top of society by working hard, or to climb the career ladder. As a result, these people usually became eccentrics.

'Pretended Psychosis' refers to people who just feign psychosis, though they do not truly suffer from the disease. This 'pretended psychosis' does indeed exist universally as a tradition. Why do I say universally? First of all, we know of tricksters in myths, and then of clowns in Shakespeare's works. In drama and in our daily life, we see that buffoonery persists and has continued to be expressed over time. I wrote a paper on this subject in which I showed that traditionally, intellectuality is expressed in clownish behavior or as a form of 'pretended psychosis.'[3]

In Zen, there are two major sects. One is the Soto sect founded by the priest Dogen, the other the *Rinzai* sect to which the monk Ikkyu belonged. The Rinzai sect propounds a unique style of dialogue called the *koan*. This is a discourse style of

communication within a religious context. Zen masters who conduct *koan* follow the lifestyle of hermits or of literati as was the case in China. These Chinese men of letters *(bunjin)* lived their lives in a space somewhere between the religious world and the secular world. Therefore, it can be said that for the Japanese case, for example that of the well-known monk Yoshida Kenko of the fourteenth century, author of the *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in Idleness), that many Japanese essayists initiated their activities by first secluding themselves from the everyday world. In Greek mythology, Hermes and Mercury appear to be the prototypes of a style of Greek trickster.[4]

I caution you that I have not distinguished exact types, calling one a mythical person and another a social occupation. Christian churches have held carnivals since medieval times. On those days, it was the priests who played the roles of clown.[5]

In the German legend from the latter half of the medieval period, Till Eulenspiegel was the perpetrator of very amusing and foolish behavior, for which Richard Strauss composed a symphonic poem. As I have already mentioned, there are clowns who appear from time to time in the works of Shakespeare. Sitting beside a king there is always a clown. King Lear always has a clown beside him and they share one identity. For example, only clowns were allowed to sit on a king's chair at palace in real life. But outside the palace, clowns were forced to live in miserable lodges like kennels. When they made a poor pun, they were kicked just as dogs were kicked. In Shakespeare, a king and a clown appear together as Touchstone in "As You Like It" or as Feste in "Twelfth Night." "Twelfth Night" is twelve nights of clowning.[6]

So, there have been always clowns, royal clowns at the palace, clowns at civilian festivals. In other drama, we have *Arlecchino* (Harlequin), a clown in the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*. In Japanese theater, we have actors in Kyogen (*No comedy*) that started in the Japanese medieval era (fourteenth century). In these Kyogen dramas, the role of Taro Kaja, one of two major clowns, is to always tease his *Daimyo* (feudal lord) like the fools of medieval royal courts in Europe.[7]

I would need much more time than I have been allotted to list all the examples of clowns in literature and the related arts. To select only a few; Verdi wrote his Opera *Rigoletto* based on a true story. Victor Hugo, on whose drama *Rigoletto* is based, wrote a novel titled *Le Roi s'amuse* (*The King Is Amused*), which is set in the era of Francois I. The story of Rigoletto is well known. Victor Hugo wrote many tragedies but at the same time and quite surprisingly, he seemed to have a sentimental attachment to clowns. He wrote a novel called *L'homme qui rit* (*Laughing Man*) which tells a very peculiar story. In the era of James II in the House of Stewart, there was a confrontation between the Royal family and other aristocrats. There was something called "an iron lady." I thought that "Iron Lady" was a nickname describing the toughness of the

former Prime Minister, now Lady Margaret Thatcher. But, in fact, "an iron lady" is a method of execution in the 17th century. It was a box with tusks or nails attached to the inside. The person to be executed was put in this box and the walls were pushed in to kill him. It was an awfully cruel method of execution. I was surprised to learn exactly what "iron lady" actually meant. I was also amazed to see how bold British people can be in setting a nickname on their Prime Minister.

In the novel *L'homme qui rit*, because of political conspiracy, children were abducted or purchased and taken to distant places and their mouths torn. They could no longer return to normal life. After having had this done to them, the children were sold to sideshow booths or related venues. In the novel, the hero is a clown who was sold like this in his childhood but who finally achieves revenge in the end. It is interesting to know that in writing this novel, Victor Hugo was aware of the image clowns purveyed in a peepshow. It is also interesting to note that Hugo opposed Napoléon III, and was exiled to the island of Jersey situated between the UK and France. He wrote this novel on that island, and I suspect that Hugo was dimly aware of the role of mediator played by the clown, connecting different layers of reality in the world.

Another example of the mediator is from Persia in the Middle East where the tradition survives of the love of religious clowns with the long name of *Nasr es di Hodja* (Nasredin Hoca) who was a priest but was always acting the buffoon. Read Hodja's *Fables*.

Another example is a story called '*Alaka Gabrahan'na*' from the reign of Haile Sellassie I of nineteenth century Ethiopia. It is a story about a collection of clowns at the palace in the nineteenth century, written in a language called Amharic, and published as book in Ethiopia[8].

What is common for all clowns is that they cannot have the same social identity as ordinary citizens. So, they cannot get ID certificates. They are deprived of social status and are not authorized to have a personal identity at all. All of these clowns quite often wear very eccentric costumes. Being deprived of identity, they are prone to cross the border between classes, sex, nationality, and knowledge, the fool versus the clever man.

For example, their speech has no consistency. It is obvious when you hear and see the clowns in Shakespeare. They ignore logic. Since their speech ignores logic, they transcend the boundaries of existing common logic and forge ahead to build their own framework within which they freely use language in an uninhibited manner.

Therefore, clowns or clownish behavior exist within a particular culture as a "foreign" culture (even though culture is usually regarded as homogeneous). In other words, clowns are different and difficult to integrate into the superficial framework of

culture since they lead an unauthorized existence. They exist as a latent potential foreign culture. Thus, the role of the artist is to play clown and transcend the limits of era and culture. The meaning of such behavior is that something stays in that culture as a latent, yet different element, and one that may be elicited as a new model for human beings.

Jean Starobinski, a great critic, has concentrated his research on the eighteenth century French Philosophy of Enlightenment. In his book, he describes, in his own quite sophisticated style, the clownish aspects possessed by artists.[9] Around the same time, I attempted to cover the same topic in my book *Folklore of Clowns*.

I have already explained the tradition of pretended psychosis, well represented by clowns and other people who have found a different culture but expressed it only in clownish ways. Pretended psychosis is elegantly displayed in clowns. A question follows. What if we apply the theory to historical fact? Let me turn to my favorite and familiar genre of literary criticism and add some comments about "*Ostranenye*," a Russian word that means making things appear strange.

This concept started in the Russian language. Therefore, it is very difficult to find a similar word in other languages, since this concept has not traditionally been recognized in their languages. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht translated it as "*Verfremdung*." Among the Japanese, most people think Brecht was the first to mention the idea. So, from the beginning, we have used a word that means something like "foregrounding." I once gave a talk on this in France and I found it was quite difficult to make myself understood. This indicated to me that France has a deep appreciation of clowns such as Jean Starobinski and a strong tradition of writing about clowns, but that when it comes to finding words to express the concept of "distancing" (*ostranenye*) the French language may not have the means of expressing this. It is different from "distinguishing." Somehow there seems to be no word for this concept in English either.

Linguists like Roman Jacobson and Trubetzkoy brought this concept into Czechoslovakia, and it was well disseminated in to the Czech language. As a result, the Czech linguist and literary critic, Jan Mukařovský used the word "*actualizas*." In English, the word "foregrounding" picks up only one particular nuance when there are several. It is a very difficult word to translate.

In the above-mentioned Zen discourse called *koan*, such a tendency existed latently. Even people outside Japan paid attention to this aspect. William Willeford spent a whole chapter describing the Zen *koan* in his book *Fool and His Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience*.

In the idea of *koan*, as a technique, word-to-word connection and association established through daily use is rejected. First, one is admonished to break and destroy

the meaning of words, which belong to one given context. One is asked to then pick up an isolated word and attach a whole different context to it.

Making a pun is actually the same process. In puning, a word belongs to one group of words. When it is cut off from that context, latent meanings entangled with that word become visible, so that another group of words comes to the forefront, intentionally excluding the word with the same pronunciation.

In the field of literary criticism, this style is called "*ikasayoh*" as proposed as early as the 1920s in such Russian critics such as Victor Shklovsky, Yury Tynyanov and Boris Eikhenbaum who has written an interesting analysis in his *Young Tolstoi*. This distancing means a shift in the meaning of a word, and the formulation continued as a means of creating vocabulary for emerging avant-garde art in the twentieth century. This could be called linguistic exile. In a sense, since this process transforms the meaning of the word within the same country, it could be called a type of domestic exile.

This led to the production of an "art language" which was the result of breaking down conventional word-to-word connections at a semantic level. Marcel Proust achieved this in writing his series of very long literary works, called collectively *Le Temps perdu*. The Irish writer James Joyce generated in *Finnegan's Wake* a novel in which the language is almost entirely a play on words. He broke down English, but imported all kinds of words from Italian, Latin, Greek, and sometimes even from Arabic to write his novel *Finnegan's Wake*. It is indeed a milestone of linguistic exile.

What James Joyce dared to accomplish was a type of semantic nomadism. Semantically, words are used with an established nuance, but in semantic nomadism, nuances go beyond borders, one after another. It may be presumptuous of me to invent this word, but it seems appropriate to define the new generation of words and nomadism. It is also an elegant way to become a foreigner who crosses borders while remaining an outsider.

The first step towards becoming a foreigner is to create a *different* state, a psychosis. We will ourselves to become "other" to ourselves. This may seem to be my conclusion, but there is another half of which I must speak.

Nomadism emerges when we become tired of the part of ourselves that tries to get along with everybody. This starts with a superficial relationship between the two parts. Then we become a different person towards that part which is customary and fused with everyday society. Therefore, the concept of "unsettled" emerges as opposed to "settled." In anthropology, we have long classified people into agricultural, nomadic, and hunting types. But when we learned this from textbooks, we did not notice the dichotomy between "sedentary" and "nomadic" that was implied.

Recently a new translation of Hegel has appeared in Japan that has prompted people to re-read him. Simultaneously, rather negative comments and assessments have been made because he eliminated non-western elements such as Asia and Africa from his ideas and historical philosophy. Therefore, we conclude that Asia and Africa are absent and not incorporated in his philosophy of world history. In short, Hegel is said to be Eurocentric. In Husserl's *Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale phänomenologie(Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology,* 1970*)*, there is also a tendency to spiritually exclude Eskimos, Indians, wanderers in Europe and Gypsies, from his concept of 'Europe.' His words may have fallen on sympathetic ears, because in his later years he corresponded with Henri Bergson and also with Lévy-Bruhl who had done research on *pensée primitive.* However, Husserl never left Germany and we have no evidence that he was able to read French. So, flatly rejecting him for excluding non-western elements might be too harsh. Usually anthropology is supposed to have emerged to complement the void in typical historical culture viewed as Eurocentric, and also to recombine thoughts on human beings. But that attempt has not been successful. I have made this abundantly clear in my previous discussion in this paper and elsewhere. Nietzsche was different, however. Nietzsche affirmed a part of Europe in an ironical sense. What did he affirm? He supported non-nationals, anarchists and immoral people, to include such characters as the Marquis de Sade. Nietzsche stated: "I support the people represented by '*Das Heimatlose*' (people without homeland). I am one of them."

In his book *Joyful Knowledge*, which can be also translated as *Happy Science*, he said: "There are few Europeans who call themselves *Das Heimatlose* and with due reason; removed from the sense of self-contempt, there are few, but I don't say there are none." Thus, it is not necessarily true that no one calls himself *Das Heimatlose*, but Hegel admitted that his form of secret wisdom and joyful knowledge can be only found in '*heimatlose*.' Hegel had the recognition of people who latently cross borders and therefore he was not what can be called a typical Christian European citizen, but a traveler without religion, a permanent migrant, and a nomad in the everyday world.

There is a silent film directed by Pabst called "*Lulu.*" Lulu was an orphan girl. Nobody knew where she came from. She managed to grow up to become a singer and dancer in a variety show theater in Berlin after World War I. She met the owner of the theater, Dr. Schon, who was regarded as a great gentleman in German civil society. He fell in love with Lulu despite the fact that he had his own family. One day he was murdered, allegedly by Lulu. Lulu had to run away, began to wander about and eventually went to London where she was stalked by legendary sort of existence. That is the story of Lulu. In Europe traditionally, there have been many works with the

theme of women as latent nomads. In Japan as well, in "*Mamushi no oroku*" and other Kabuki stories, people forced to wander are often described as, in the end, having to become, for example, the head of a gang.

There has always been a minority in the world who does not get along with the currently accepted ideology. Being a minority, they are pushed out of the mainstream. But we have had writers who **wish** to be pushed out, putting themselves willingly in the minority and in marginal places, wishing to be that way and choosing to live always as an outsider. Franz Kafka chose this role in Prague in Czechoslovakia. He was, in reality, a great person but dared to choose a path of being ignored. It is tremendously important to know there have been some who have taken another option.

It is important particularly when we think about nomads, that is, when we think about what the ideal society of the future will be, or about what utopia is, what we think about what, in our current state, is still a fantasy and about what in future will be taken for granted. We cannot broaden our thinking if we treat these wanderers and nomads lightly.

There is a fellow who exemplifies nomadism in Japanese cities whose name is Tadashi Kawamata. He, however, does not like to be called nomadic, saying only that he is a bit different.

In May 1999, the Conference of the Japanese Association of Semiotics took up the common theme of the contrast between Stable Elements and Hypothetical or Ephemeral Elements in Culture (the Semiotics of Ephemerality). The participants were from various fields such as architecture, publishing, graphic arts, cartooning, comic strips and others, and many made presentations at the conference.[10] Tadashi Kawamata, who gave a talk on the ephemeral elements in his work, is from Hokkaido, and graduated from the Tokyo Institute of Art some years ago. He has produced his artistic work in many places in the world: Switzerland, France, the US, the Netherlands, Belgium and so on. Kawamata's concept is shared by a group called "Object school" (*mono-ha*), which is a style of art that emerged in the 1960s. For them, simple consciousness is fine, and any material is acceptable. For example, a log or any other thing will do. Not to process the material of objects, but to elicit latent elements of beauty in them by giving them a certain context is the basic concept of "object style." Mainly its leader, Mr. Lee Wohang, a Korean-Japanese artist, has developed the style. Another artist who works in this style is Kishio Suga. In Japanese, the word for object is *mono*. The word denotes physical things themselves, but sometimes its sound has a connotation of something powerful and devilish. *Mono-ha* artists have produced works that look very plain at a glance, but that can emit a magically powerful light when combined or arranged.

Since seeing is believing, let me describe a few works by Kawamata (ill. 1~10). Kawamata belongs to the 'Object school,' although he does not like to be labeled that way. Artists are usually somewhat cranky. They say they don't like to be categorized so easily. He often uses lumber prolifically inside and outside buildings to generate a certain power. He often approaches things with big and exaggerated structures, something that should be described only in Capital letters: Big Cities, for example, and Big, Famous Buildings; or Houses as a physical structure. The word in Japanese for house is *ie* which also indicates 'family' as well. Kawamata gives a twist to these basic structures so that apparently stable elements such as family are distorted or vaporized into an amorphous state. For the last fifteen years, Kawamata has given his twist on art to many places in the world, especially in Western Europe and various parts of Japan, often using lumber but in a completely different way from the conventional idea of building a house. For example, in New York he put up a very shabby beggar's hut-like structure right next to a famous building. This is the sort of thing he does. Some people interpret his work as being just on the borderline between art and a minor offense. Kawamata has not been afraid to do this anywhere in the world. His works are unique, and he tries to see the future possibilities in things currently ignored and/or abandoned.

To give you another example, there is a painter whose name is Roland Topor. Topor also produces works of animation. Not only does he animate pictures, but he also does photo-snapshots. For example, Camembert cheese is split into two, each half competing then in its speed of melting, and the process is photographed as snapshots...click, click, and click. Looking at it, it seems that each half of the Camembert is actually in competition, vying in its melting speed. It requires ten hours or twenty hours, or more. Topor does this type of art. His Camembert was confusing because one is no longer sure what to say. Should one say, "This is how the Camembert is changing"? Or, should one say "The Camembert is proliferating"? Or, how about "The Camembert is ripening"? Anyway, this is how he sends his message, by taking simple snapshots of such objects.

There are similar elements in Kawamata. He does not make up-front direct criticism on urban architecture, but rather he quietly approaches from behind and visualizes unnoticed potential changes in cities with such growths as moss, mold, bacteria and so on.

In terms of a relationship with the natural environment, someone has researched moss in several Japanese cities. In Shizuoka prefecture, he discovered the process through which moss disappeared from the Tokaido, a main trunk road along the Pacific coast of Japan famously recorded in a series of prints by Hiroshige for example. In short, being sensitive to air pollution, moss retreats little by little. Even in temple

grounds, moss is gradually disappearing. On the contrary, Kawamata puts moss, or something similar, right into the center of a city, perhaps helping it to form a revenge. Can moss (*koke*) exact revenge? Of course not, moss can only fail (*kokeru* in Japanese), you might think. Still, Kawamata creeps into a city and provides some twists to facilitate the process of proliferation even within urban boundaries. I provide some photographs of his "Tokyo Project" in which he has incorporated such twists here and there in Tokyo in the last three years. One is of a vending machine. We ordinary people think that a vending machine is a box in which to put a coin to get something back, and that is all. Kawamata was for a long time away from Japan, and when he came back he was surprised at what he saw in Tokyo. What surprised him? He was astonished to see much of Tokyo's space occupied by vending machines. A mysterious fact is that once several vending machines are lined up together, nobody thinks much about the space behind them, and much vacant space is created in back of these machines. In Kawamata's photos, vending machines can be seen to have created many vacant spaces in Tokyo, and into those spaces, people can creep and lead their lives. This was his experiment. Could people live in such spaces? A power supply can easily be accessed from vending machines, since without a power supply no vending machine can operate. Water can be brought in. Public toilets can be used, and so on. The result is that, without having a house, a physical structure, people can live. That was verified in Kawamata's experiment, but he also demonstrated a new relationship between cities and people. Without going into detail, it can be said that his might be the beginning of a new attempt to create a different city *inside* a city.

Possibly, Kawamata's experiment might mean that when we talk about crossing borders, we may mean not only crossing in and out of a pre-determined framework of inside and outside, but also passing through the borders in our own mind. Shuji Terayama, a Japanese playwright, created "A Wall-Passing Man," a story about a man who lost his identity. And this man could pass through the borders of his mind so easily that he could understand others' sufferings, even unwillingly. This drama is about his resultant agony. So, if I may invent the phrase "body-passing person," it might be used to mean crossing the borders of culture. Kawamata's "Tokyo Project" is a good example of an artist's experiment in trying to select out the medium of the "city" as one fit for "crossing the borders of culture" as I have discussed.

Notes

1   Yamaguchi, M, "Yudayajin no chiteki jonetsu [On The Intellectual Passion of Jews]," in *Hon no*

Shinwagaku [The Mythology of The Book], Chuo koron sha, Tokyo, 1971.37-71.

2 Deutcher, I., *Non-Jewish Jews* (Japanese Translation) Tokyo, Iwanami Shoten, 1970 .

3 Yamaguchi, M., "Two Types of Japanese in Modern Japan," Dept. of Comparative Cultures, Sapporo University, *Journal of Comparative Cultures*, No.1, 1997.

4 Imafuku, Ryuta, "Masao Yamaguchi: Harlequin and Hermes," in *Semiotic Web,* Northern Publishers, Amsterdam, 1996, pp.93-107.

5 Dahrendorff, "Intellectuals as Clowns." See in Yamaguchi, M, "Images of Intellectuals in Cultures."(1966) in Yamaguchi, M., *Shinpen Jinruigakuteki Shiko* [Anthropological Thinking, New Edition], Chikuma Shobo, Tokyo, 1979, pp.262-284.

6 Huizinga, J., *Homo Ludens* (Japanese Translation), Chuokoronsha,1963.

7 Yamaguchi, M., *Doke no minzokugaku* [The Folklore of The Clown], Shincho sha, Tokyo 1972.

8 My description is based on fieldwork I undertook in Addis Ababa in 1968-9.

9 Starobinski, Jean, *Le portrait d'un artiste en saltinbanque*, E. Skira, Genève, 1974.

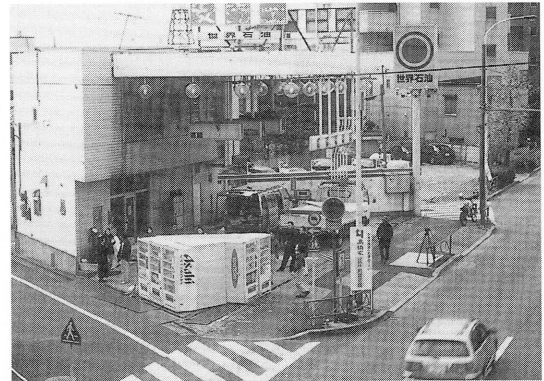10 "Special Issue on Semiotics of Ephemerality," *Journal of Japanese Association of Semiotics*, March 2000.
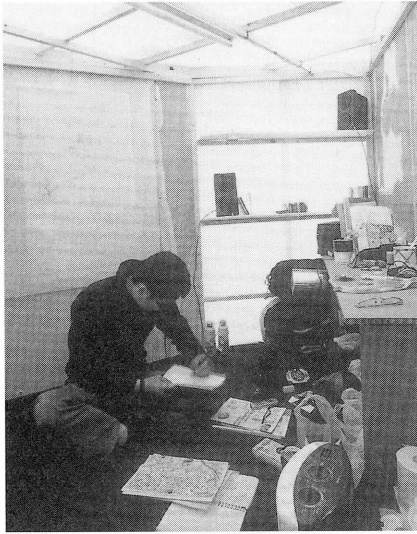
① 「自販機の家」
"The Vending Machine House"
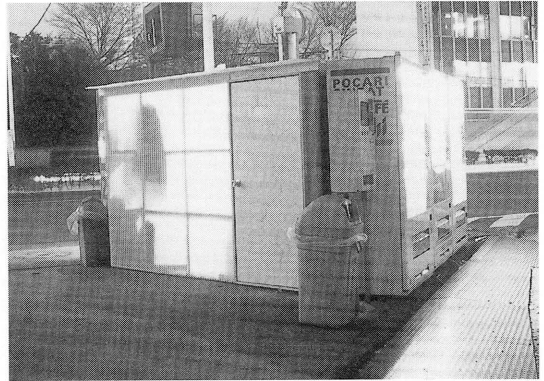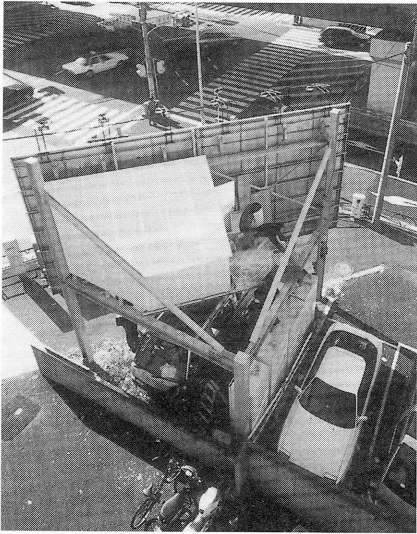

② 「自販機の家」
"The Vending Machine House"

③ 「自販機の家」
"The Vending Machine House"
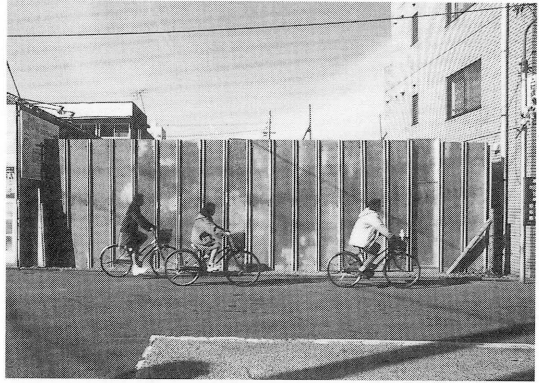

④ 「ビルボードの家」
"The Billboard House"
under Construction
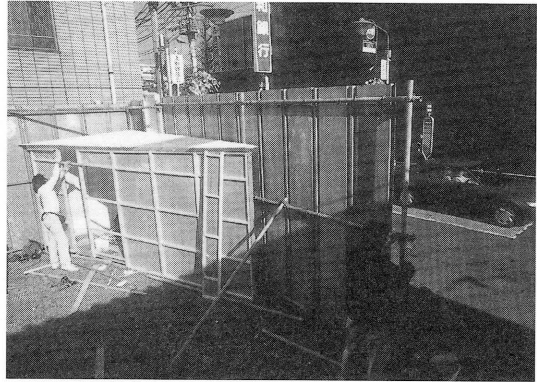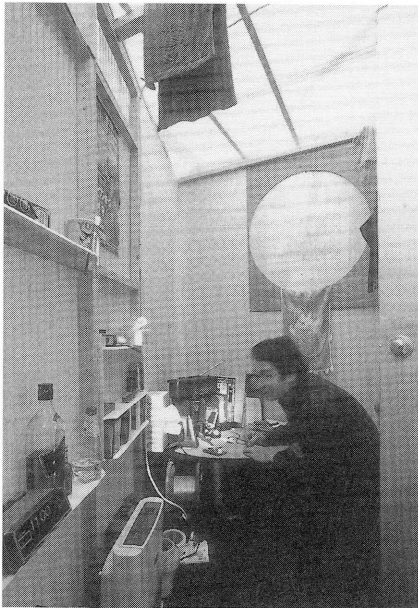

⑤ 「ビルボードの家」
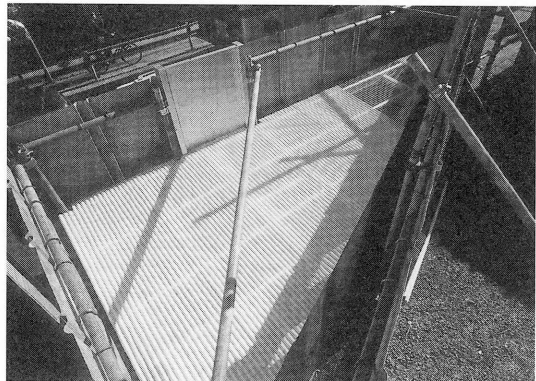"The Billboard House"
設営中

⑥「ビルボードの家」
"The Billboard House"

⑧「工事用フェンスの家」
"Construction Fence House"

⑨「工事用フェンスの家」
"Construction Fence House"
under Construction

⑦「工事用フェンスの家」
"Construction Fence House"

⑩「工事用フェンスの家」
"Construction Fence House"