The Noguchi Legacy: Artistic Vagabondage of Yone and Isamu Noguchi, from Poetry to Sculpture, between patriotism and internationalism

August 19, 2010
ICLA Seoul Congress
Banraisha, Keio University, 1950-51
Isamu Noguchi + Yoshirô Taniguchi
Leonie Kadokawa Pictures, 2010
Based on Masayo Duus, The Life of Isamu Noguchi, Princeton University Press, 2004
Director: Hisako Matsui
Writer: Hisako Matsui and David Wiener
Photography: Tetsuo Nagata
Cast: Emily Mortimer, Shido Nakamura

The XIXth Congress of ICLA, Seoul, Korea Aug.15-21, 2010
Congress theme:
“C.L. need to move beyond its Western origins”
“Korea is the only divided country on the face of earth”
“Breaking down boundaries and overcoming frontiers”
• Writing the Conflicts and Otherness
• Translating Differences, Connecting the World
• Asia in the Changing Comparative Paradigm

Yone Noguchi (1875-1947)
Leonie Gilmore, Letter to Frank Putnam, May 27, 1906
The passage is omitted from the English version; the above is a tentative retranslation into English by S. Inaga.

Isamu’s character is infinitely complicated and at the same time pure and simple as a child. At times he was incredibly sweet and sympathetic, but at another moment he exploded like a volcano or manifested furious behavior. An unchangeable schizo. But he was outstanding in his high pride as an artist and minority as a human being. His insight into all kind of things was a constant surprise. As an inevitably selfish behavior was followed by his duality, original name which was so rare and intelligent. I knew his wonderful smile which he showed when we were alone. Such wise, constant interruptions for me. (Interview, Nov.14, 1994, the passage is omitted from the English version; the above is a tentative translation into English by S. Inaga.

Tentative retranslation into English by S. Inaga. (interview, Nov.14, 1994, the passages are omitted from The Life of Isamu Noguchi.

Los Angeles Herald, Nov. 14, 1904
Five months later, in 1905, the marriage between Caucasian and Mogorian is forbidden by the law.

Isamu Noguchi in passport Photograph, 1918

Yone tends to run from one side to the extreme opposite when he is criticized. The same is true to Yo (Isamu). When scolded as he was covered with mud, he jumps into the washing tub without taking off his clothes.

Priscilla Morgan
Joanna Noguchi’s devoted Business Partner from 1959 until Isamu’s death in 1988

Isamu Noguchi, The American Diary of A Japanese Girl, 1902

Yone tried to run from one side to the extreme opposite when he is criticized. The same is true to Yo (Isamu). When scolded as he was covered with mud, he jumps into the washing tub without taking off his clothes.

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Joanna Noguchi in passport Photograph, 1918

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14:00-14:15 Introduction: Shigemi INAGA
14:15-14:40 Miyoko HADA
Yone Noguchi as a Japonisme Novelist
14:45-15:10 Masayo Duus
Yone Noguchi’s Poetics as a Writer of Dual Nationality
15:15-15:45 Discussion
15:50-15:55 Break
16:00-16:30 MAK REN
Yone Noguchi and Omi's Crossed Intl. Society
16:35-17:00 Gen A DACHI
Avant-Garde Debate over Japanese Tradition in 1950s
17:00-17:30 General Discussion
17:30 Closing
For the purpose of introducing Japan to the West, Yone Noguchi is the best choice. If we try to show the genuine in-translatable Japan as it is, the foreigners can hardly understand it. It is indispensable to modify it to a certain degree in Western languages so as to render it accessible to them. Yone Noguchi is the top person who is capable of doing this wise job without hesitation. From our Japanese standpoint, however, Mr. Noguchi's poetry smells too much Western, and we are not satisfied with this incongruity in him which does not fit our national emotions and sentiments. The opposite would be also the case with European observers. However, this is why his art is continually new for us, and allows us to feel the fresh sea wind blowing from the Pacific Ocean.


When Japanese read my poetry they say, “His Japanese poems are not so good but perhaps his English poems are better.” When Westerner read my English poetry, They say “I cannot bear to read his English poems, but his Japanese poems must be superb.” To tell the truth, I have no confidence in either languages. In other words, I guess I am a dual citizen.

Yone Noguchi, (in Japanese) Tokyo, 1921

-- Artistic Vagabondage of Yoné and Isamu Noguchi: From Poetry to Sculpture in Conflict between the East and the West, Chung-Ang University, August 19, 2010.
Ironically, his father’s passionate dream of conquering two cultural worlds has taken firm root in his bastard son. “The more Isamu longed for the absent father who never recognized him as his son, the more he despised him—and the more he wanted to be like him.” By taking his father’s surname without his father’s permission he not only reclaiming his rights as a ‘Japanese,’ he was also transforming his soldiering anger into a vital creative drive.” M. Duus, The Life of Isamu Noguchi, 109.

Yone Noguchi (1874-1947)

Nayantara Pandit (1927-)

Jawaharlal Nehru’s younger sister

Ranjit Sitaram Pandit

Chandralekha Pandit, Metha

Nayantara Pandit, Sahgal (1927-)

Rita Pandit, Dar

Akari Light Sculpture,
Noguchi Memorial Museum,


The Triangular House, Isamu designed with Leonie and supervised the construction in 1913-14. At the age of 10, Photo, Isamu Noguchi.

Isamu Noguchi’s at his MacDougal Alley studio, New York, in 1948.

Crishna’s Butter Ball, Mahabalipuram, India, 2005 (photo, S. Inaga).

The Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji Temple

Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji Temple

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Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, Facing at Yashima, photo Kishin Shinoyama.

Play Mountain, Moere Lake Park, photo Hiroo Namiki.

Paul Klee, Ad Parnassum, 1932 No. 274, Kunstmuseum, Bern.

The Noguchi Museum, NY

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