



AKARI

Sculpture by Other Means

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What is Sculpture?, Isamu Noguchi's exhibition for the United States pavilion at the 1986 Venice Biennale, consisted, in its entirety, of a 32-ton working white marble slide; two sculptures made from five untouched rocks (*Beginnings*) and four slabs of quarry waste (*Ends*); and 34 Akari lanterns. Having been universally warned not to include Akari in the exhibition—they were seen as too commercial—Noguchi designed a new line of 13 “VB”-designated lanterns just for the installation.

Over the preceding three decades, Akari, the result of decades of working with light, had developed into Noguchi's most successful expansion of the concepts, purposes, and potential of sculpture. Collapsible and lightweight; easily stored, shipped, and installed; useful, inspiring, and affordable, they essentially resolve the most intractable difficulties of sculpture. Fully enmeshed in life, they may well now be the most ubiquitous artworks on Earth—give or take a religious icon or two. Each one is essentially a star at the center of its own domestic cosmos. No matter where you put them—in a machine for living or in a cave—like our sun, they organize space, produce light, heat, and support life; and, generally speaking, represent the glorious unknowability of existence. All it takes, as Noguchi liked to point out, is one Akari in an empty room to generate the ineffable place-concept we call home.

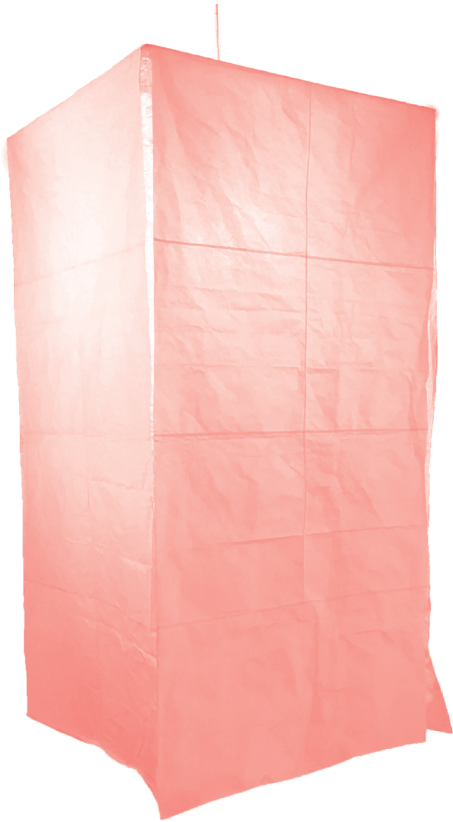
Noguchi meant Akari to have the diversity of nature, his preferred model of industry. That is why—to the dismay of his commercial partners—he never stopped adding to it, infusing its economy with a never-ending flow of “new departures” (as he called the continuous innovations), which in their wild evolutionary fervor amounted to a near biological commitment to complexity. But in the years since Noguchi's death in 1988, commercial and curatorial exigencies have led to a general trend towards the rationalization, codification, and over-simplification of the Akari ecosystem.

Akari: Sculpture by Other Means, a celebration of their flexibility, modularity, and playfulness, reintroduces a little lightness, illogic, and nuance back into the mix.

Dakin Hart, Senior Curator, The Noguchi Museum

Akari: Sculpture By Other Means is accompanied by two complementary exhibitions:
Akari Unfolded: A Collection by YMER&MALTA and *Akari from the Archives*.

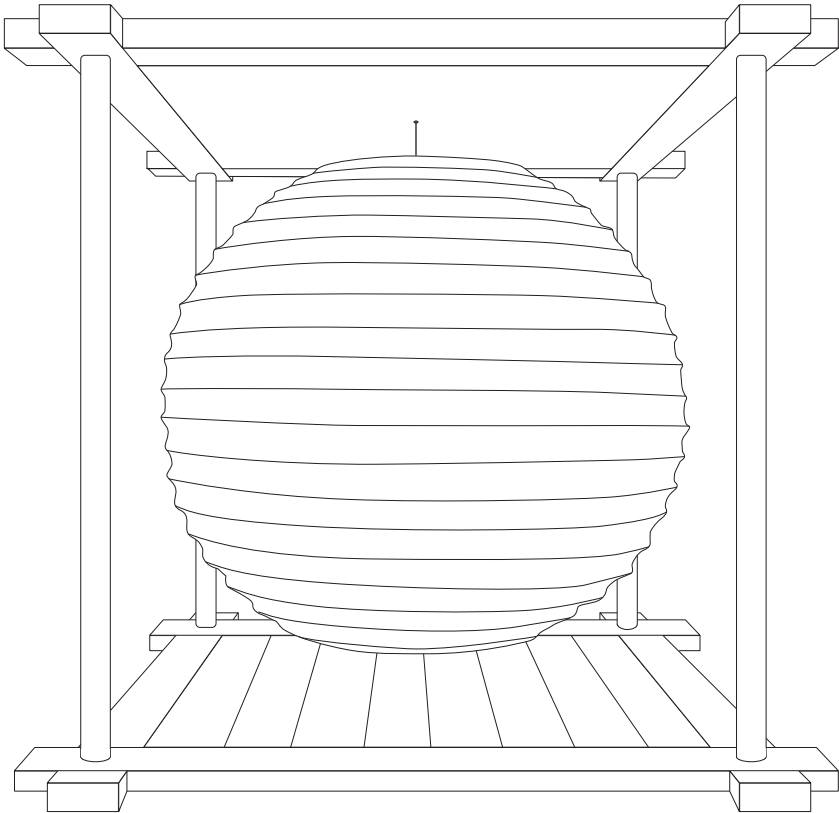




PL1
c. 1973



PL2
c. 1973
Wood structure 2018



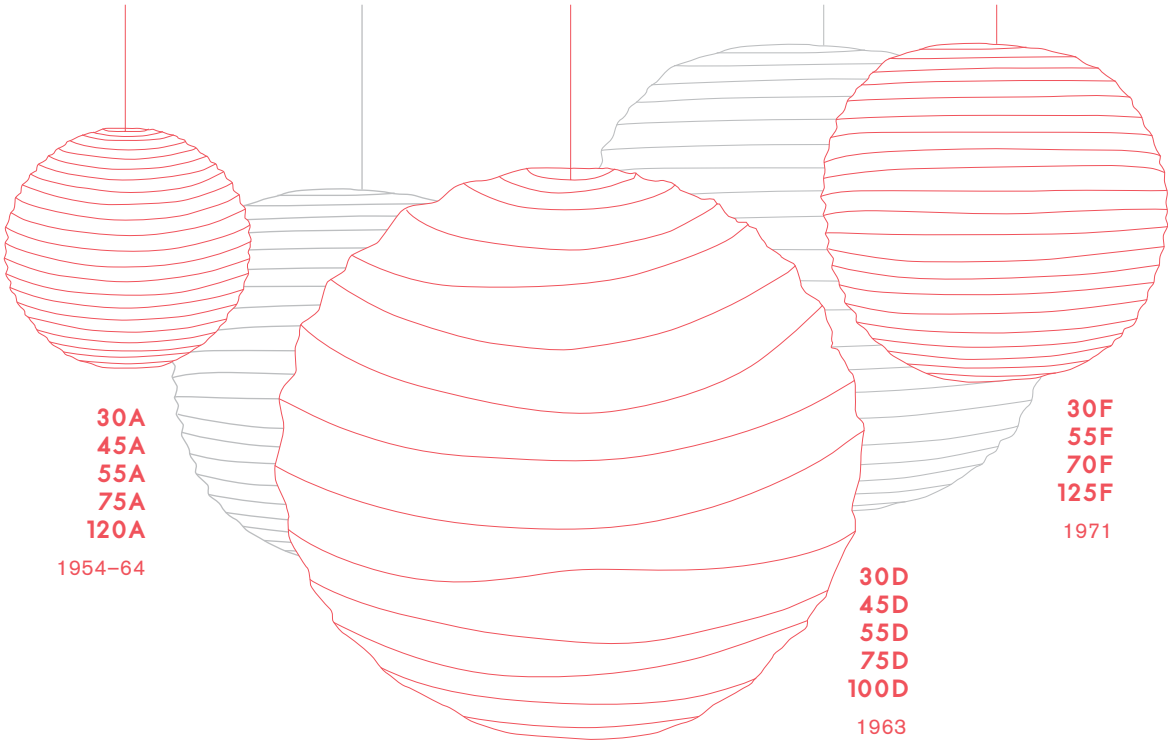
200D
1985

AKARI SPACE

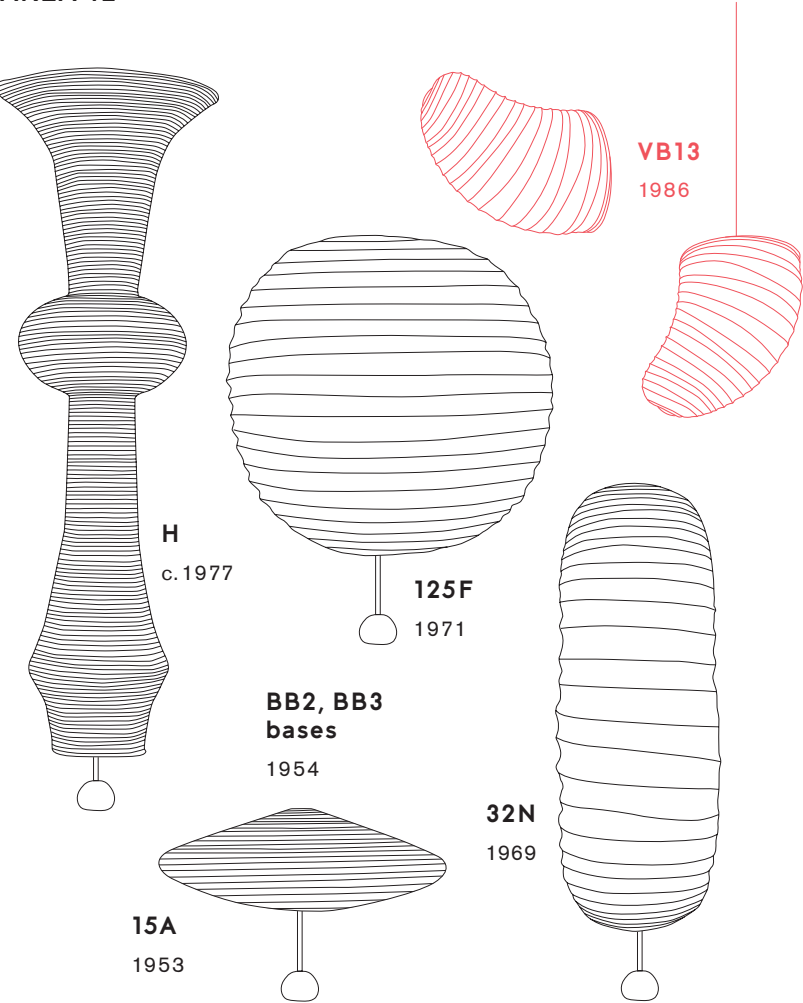
Even as Akari succeeded in expanding the boundaries of sculpture, they struggled to break free from “objectitis”—being understood as things. This led Noguchi to push them increasingly into space, to become, adopting László Moholy-Nagy’s wonderful term, light-space modulators: devices that sculpt the spaces in which they exist. Installed here are the two-meter-diameter Akari in a box that Noguchi made for the Venice Biennale, and the changing room-like PL1—both of which are as much environment as sculpture—and a new space constructed here to push that idea even further using the modular PL2.

AKARI CLOUD

From nature, Japanese crafts, and Marcel Duchamp, Noguchi learned to create a sense of order and serenity using imperfectness, chance, and ephemerality. Noguchi was as interested in metaphorical lightness as he was in working literally with light. Taking a cue from an ideal of natural profusion he explored frequently in retail displays and exhibitions, this cloud of Akari was modeled on a school of jellyfish, a quadrant of starry sky, Man Ray’s *Obstruction*, or a field of seeding dandelions (if we were ants.)

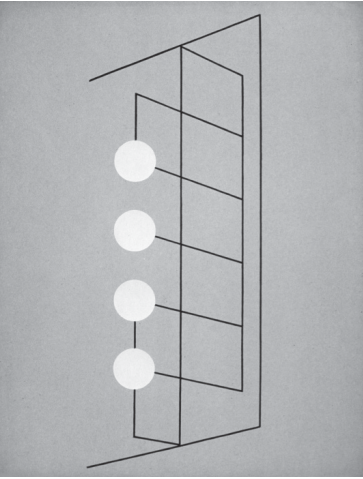
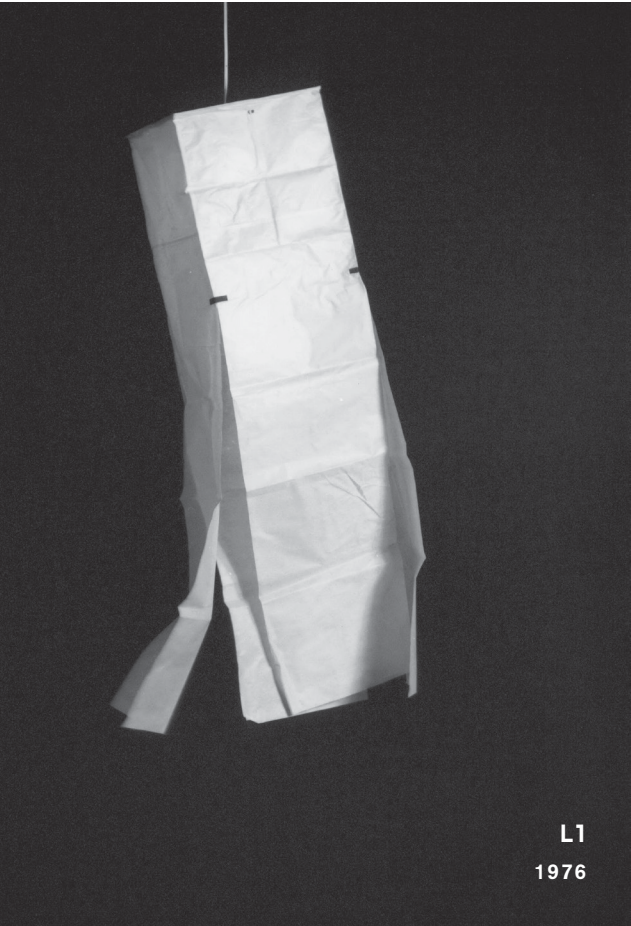


AREA 12

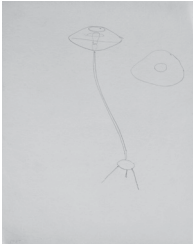


AKARI MODULAR

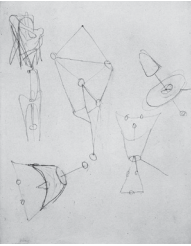
Inspired by archival photographs of a handful of Noguchi’s thousands of experiments across “the gamut of possibilities” of working with light that motivated him, these installations explore the use, composition, interpretation, and sculptural intent of Akari. Here are plays on scale, environment, staging, and other real-world references Noguchi designed into them. Nature works by varying and repeating basic structures. That is the philosophy of Akari, and handmade crafts in general: that natural variation offers, in Noguchi’s words, “a foil to our harsh, mechanized existence” or, to put it another way, a little poetry.



Paris Abstraction
1928



Design study
c.1942–48

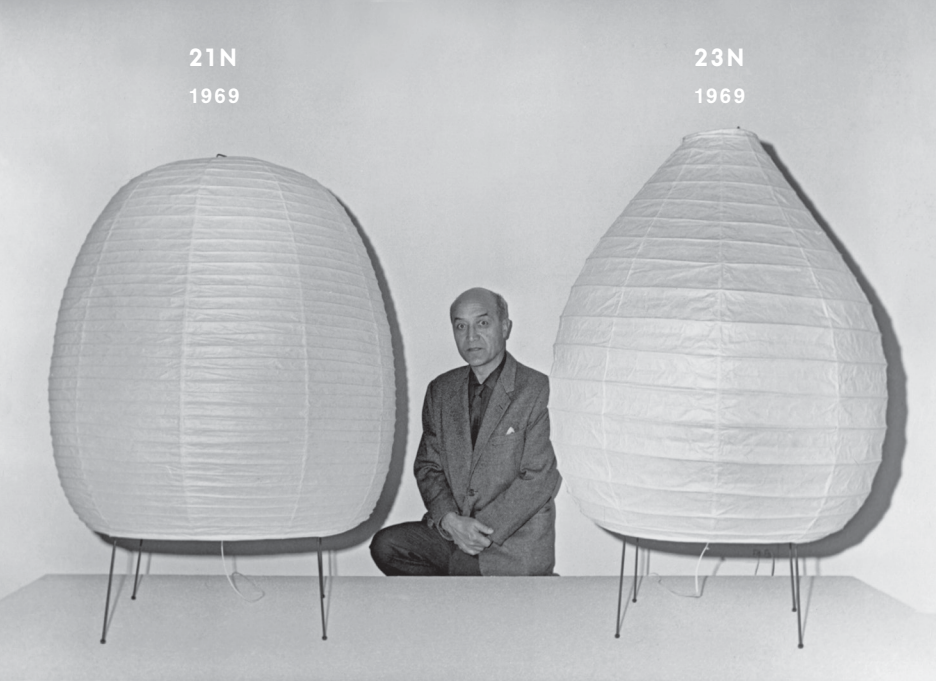
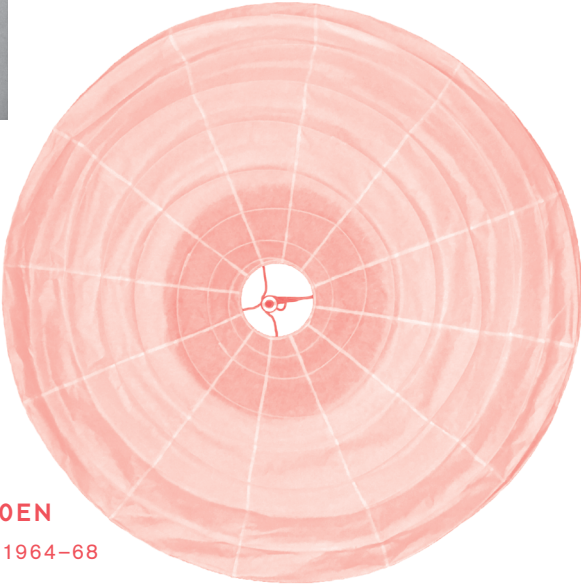


Sculpture study
c.1942–48

1AR
c. 1954



70EN
c. 1964–68



NOGUCHI ON AKARI

“It was probably inevitable that the organization of all this developed gradually – the deflection of an old tradition requires intricate accommodations to social as well as mechanical inertia. I hope I convey something which may be of value to others concerned with bringing alive, for ourselves and our times, the countless nuances of life from other times and places which otherwise are likely to pass away everywhere under the impact of our western ‘progress.’” *CRAFT HORIZONS* 14.5, OCTOBER 1954

“Although the elimination of the reflecting surface may be said to remove sculpture as well, this is not a denial but a further extension of it. It is consonant with other trends today toward the questioning and negation of materiality. We grow to appreciate more and more the ‘less-thingness’ of things, the less encumbered perceptions.” *ARTS & ARCHITECTURE* VOL 72, NO 5, MAY 1955

“I believe Akari to be a true development of an old tradition. The qualities that have been sought are those that were inherent to it, not as something oriental but as something we need. The superficial shapes or functions may be imitated but not these qualities.” *ARTS & ARCHITECTURE* VOL 72, NO 5, MAY 1955

“I believe in the possibilities of art designed for multiple production (not reproduction). Art is whatever it is called.” *INTERIORS* VOL 128, NO 6, JANUARY 1969

“I’d like to make Akari so that people can get inside them. Of course I think probably this sort of thing comes from my recollection of Japan and the shoji and the light coming from outside inside so eventually you end up by being inside the light. I think I have that kind of feeling about sculpture, of wanting to be inside the sculpture.” INTERVIEW WITH PAUL CUMMINGS FOR THE ARCHIVES OF AMERICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, 1973

“For me, function was only an initial consideration; my main purpose has always been art as it relates to life. I work with the gamut of possibilities. Inherent in Akari are lightness and fragility. They seem to offer a magical unfolding away from the material world.” *THE ISAMU NOGUCHI GARDEN MUSEUM, NEW YORK: ABRAMS, 1987*

Ralph Schoenstein on
Whitehall St. Draft Center
Tom Wolfe on
Gambling and Status
Richard Goldstein on
John Wayne
Jack Nessel on
Woody Allen

NEW YORK

THE WORLD JOURNAL TRIBUNE MAGAZINE
DECEMBER 18, 1966

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