

Until the advent of Westernization, life on the domestic scene [in Japan] was enacted at the lowest altitude, and, to this day, wherever tatami form a common ground, the floor of a traditional room is table, desk, and bed. Western furniture with its towering shapes upset aesthetics as well as manners by entailing, literally, new horizons. The worst offender was the chair.

Unlike sleeping in beds, sitting on chairs requires aptitude and training. To sit for hours with legs dangling, or even with the feet firmly planted on the ground, is torture to the Japanese. Only when their hams touch the floor are they at ease. (To be sure, some city people are inured to chairs and share the foreigners' difficulty in sitting the native way. Whether such difficulty is physical or mental, it contradicts the experience of those Japanese who, after living for years in Western countries, happily go home to their tatami.)

BERNARD RUDOLFSKY, *THE KIMONO MIND* (DOUBLEDAY & COMPANY, 1965)

Noguchi: Body-Space Devices is a selective survey of the strategies that Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) used to connect the body to space in his work, from literal use (dance and theater sets, furniture, play equipment) to works that thematize assembly (puzzle-like interlocking sculptures), and empathy-inspiring biomorphic abstractions.

Brendan Fernandes: Contract and Release (opening September 11) reconfigures *Noguchi: Body-Space Devices* as the site of a multidisciplinary collaboration with Brendan Fernandes (b. 1979), a choreographer, sculptor, and dancer trained in Martha Graham and ballet techniques, as part of his ongoing exploration of the roots of his own vocabulary of movement.

COVER
Gene Fenn, Cover photograph for *Junior Bazaar*, October 1944, with object by Isamu Noguchi.

ABOVE
Isamu Noguchi in a Lobi chair in his Long Island City studio, c. 1960s. The Noguchi Museum Archive.

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The Noguchi Museum
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NOGUCHI: BODY–SPACE DEVICES

“Sculpture,” Isamu Noguchi wrote in the brochure for his first important exhibition in 1935, “can be a vital force in our everyday life if projected into communal usefulness.”¹

Among the fundamental conventions and mores to which we are trained (consciously and unconsciously) from birth are our habits of physical being: the way, for example, that we hold a child, sit in a chair, or walk through a garden. Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) was interested in cultures of movement because motion was inextricable from his conception of sculpture—which he gradually came to understand as the network of forces and relationships in operation around and between object, space, and viewer.

Noguchi’s early commitment to set design, land art, furniture, and playgrounds—which significantly precedes his distinctive objects—demonstrates that the thrust of this unusual orientation was always social: not static-aesthetic, but interactive-spatial. Two of his later body-space devices illustrate the breadth of what he meant by communal usefulness. *This Earth, This Passage* is a floor-hugging atoll or caldera he created by walking on a ring of clay to spatialize and animate a philosophy of grounded, relativistic subject position awareness. *Play Sculpture* is more of an astral projector: an orbit around a void in folded space-time designed to produce a love of aimless travel, topography, and circularity over linearity—for kids.

It’s no surprise that Noguchi came to regard nearly everything he made as some kind of garden—whether imaginary landscape, literal space, or environment-creating object. Wandering in a garden was the most encompassing, and universal, terrestrial allegory he found for the interactive environmental dynamics to which he aspired. He once said that he wanted everyone experiencing one of his environments to feel like the first person on Earth. And if you’re interested in shaping the perceptions of humanity, exploring the natural landscape is arguably the perfect root-level common denominator.

Just as he endeavored to make objects that escaped time (fashion) and space (any one culture) by blending traditions of making, Noguchi understood that by combining different cultures of movement he could produce broadly comprehensible spatial experiences. That is why The Noguchi Museum—one of his larger sculptural scenarios—with its small but spellbinding garden, operates so consistently on such a wide range of people. The remarkable diversity of body-space devices (or concretized spatial circumstances) displayed in the Museum, and on view in this exhibition, are meant to induce and defuse physical, emotional, and perceptual tension—from empathy-producing forms such as *2 = 1*, and physical prompts such as *Strange Bird*’s assembled classical contraposto or the striding kouros/fourth position stance of *Untitled* (1972), to the literal American frontier-community generating *Appalachian Spring* set. The Museum itself was designed not to dazzle the eyes or boggle the mind but to exercise our perceptual awareness, as nature does. Explaining his “Garden of the Moon” proposal for the U.S. exhibit for Expo 70 in Osaka, Japan, Noguchi wrote that “space” would be “defined by a complex of sculptural forms which, though man-made and formal in quality, [would] take their strength and ‘presence’ from natural rhythm[s] and forces.”² It’s this engaging physical complexity that makes time spent in the Museum relaxing and cathartic like a swim in a cold river or a long run on a mountain trail.

The historical quality of Noguchi’s understanding that our perception of space is fundamentally social and can be shaped with civic intent was the basis of his relationship with the choreographer Martha Graham (1894–1991). Like Noguchi, Graham was a great inventor of spaces of the mind. Within the imaginatively boundless universe of the stage, she created one of the great movement vocabularies of the twentieth century. Writing of their collaboration a year after Noguchi’s death in a piece for the *New York Times*, Graham reflected on how his idea of space, and the props

that he made for her, produced the otherworldly motive forces on which her dances thrived.

One of the two works Isamu made for me that touched me the most deeply is the central piece for *Herodiade*. I had wanted the image of a woman, waiting and wandering within the landscape of her own psyche, her own bleached bones placed before the black mirror of her fate. What Isamu brought to me was a haunting evocation. Deep within the bones was placed a small object, a bird. I sensed it was Herodiade’s heart, vibrating and exposed to life. Whenever I danced *Herodiade*, it was always to this animating force that I moved across the stage.³

That skeletal mirror with its fleeting weathervane of a heart is an example of Noguchi’s interlocking sculptures: constructed, volumeless, collapsible, portable house-of-cards bodies that are his contribution to existential sculpture. In full motion and living color in ballets such as *Herodiade* (1944), Graham modeled the seminal archetypes of human emotion and behavior by leveraging such devices to elide the distance between the fictive space of the stage and the true spaces within us.

Quite recently, art historians have become interested in a frontier in the science of perception: the operation of mirror neurons. These are complexes of nerve cells in our premotor and inferior parietal cortices that fire the same way when we see an action performed as they do when we perform it ourselves. On a very basic, sub- or preconscious level, it turns out, our brains collapse the distinction between seeing and doing. Mirror neurons, in other words, may be the physical basis of sociability, the natural technology of empathy, acculturation, and civilization. Because so much of art making is rooted in mimesis, the imitation of the real, mirror neurons seem to represent a new horizon in understanding how and why art works.

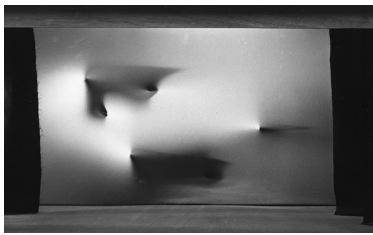
Noguchi knew nothing about mirror neurons, which had not yet been discovered when he died. But he was focused on what it took both to provoke a physical response to his work and to make objects and spaces (devices) capable of producing a physical connection to the world. Thinking specifically about how to convey heaviness and weightlessness, for example, he applied a formula borrowed from the Japanese tea ceremony, in which “light things are handled as though heavy, and heavy things as though light”⁴ by way of producing physical grace. Although Noguchi does not explicitly connect these dots, given his knowledge and interests, it is unlikely that it escaped him that the way motion and mass are linked in the tea ceremony is not far, speaking metaphorically, from Einstein’s revelation that energy is fast-moving mass.

Cross-circuiting our impressions of weight and weightlessness, by sculpting with them as if they were reversed, is a very Noguchi-like way to take advantage of the responses that mirror neurons seemingly allow. This was Noguchi’s hard-won expertise: mixing physical, conceptual, and physical/experiential equivalencies. Akari was his personal favorite example of this: ephemeral works made of light designed to generate the supermassive gravitational pull of home and the life-affirming influence of the sun. Leave it to Noguchi to recognize the universe—a system of objects in motion, propelled by irresistible invisible forces—a natural model for sculpture.

He was, for the same reason, fascinated by the structure of the molecule, which essentially mirrors that of the solar system, albeit with somewhat different animating forces. He would have been very interested to learn that the synapses in our brains are yet another analog for the kind of space he was after: areas in which impulses are transmitted and received across small gaps, in response to profound, inexorable stimuli whose function we can’t fully explain. “Call it sculpture,” he wrote, “when it moves you so.”⁵

¹ “Isamu Noguchi,” Marie Harriman Gallery, 1935, The Noguchi Museum Archive.
² Isamu Noguchi, “U.S. EXHIBIT FOR EXPO 70 AT OSAKA, JAPAN,” undated typescript, The Noguchi Museum Archive.
³ Martha Graham, “From Collaboration, a Strange Beauty Emerged,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1989, H6.

⁴ Isamu Noguchi, *Isamu Noguchi: A Sculptor’s World* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1968; repr., Göttingen, Germany: Steidl, 2004 / 2015), 37.
⁵ Isamu Noguchi, *The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum* (New York: Abrams, 1987), 285.



Exhibition copy of Isamu Noguchi's backdrop for Martha Graham's *Wilderness Stair (Diversion of Angels)* 1948 (fabricated 2019)

Choreography by Martha Graham
Costumes by Martha Graham
Music composed by Norman Dello Joio
This set was retired after one performance.



This Earth, This Passage 1962 (cast 1963)
Bronze



Abstraction in Almost Discontinuous Tension, 1928
Brass, wire



Play Sculpture c. 1965 (fabricated 2017)
Steel



Costume study for Ruth Page's *The Bells*, c.1946
Gouache on cardboard



Untitled, 1972
Serpentine, marble



2 = 1, 1988
Bronze plate



Untitled 1970
Mannari granite



Personage I 1984
Andesite



Kyoko-san 1984
Andesite



Effigy, 1972
Wood, paint



Glad Day 1930
Bronze



Untitled, 1958
Aluminum



To Love 1970
Marble



Avatar 1947 (cast 1984)
Bronze



Strange Bird 1945 (cast 1988)
Bronze, black patina



Gregory 1945 (cast 1964)
Bronze, dark green patina



Fishface 1945 (cast 1989)
Bronze, gold patina



Trinity 1945 (cast 1974)
Bronze



Figure 1945 (cast 1986)
Bronze (original in marble)



Arnold Eagle Martha Graham performing *Herodiade* with set by Isamu Noguchi c. 1944
Photographic print



Worksheet for Sculpture, 1945
Pencil on cut graph paper

MURAL
Eliot Elisofon
Maquettes for interlocking sculptures in Noguchi's 33 MacDougal Alley studio, 1946



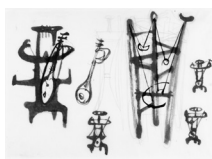
ON PEGBOARD
Danny Da Silva
Assembly models for Isamu Noguchi's interlocking sculptures, 2019
Wood



Rudolph Burckhardt
Noguchi assembling *Figure*, c. 1944
Photographic print



Untitled (seven ideas for sculptures) c. 1944
Pencil on paper



Untitled (six ideas for sculptures) c. 1940
Ink and wash on paper



Indonesia
Shadow puppet
Leather, wood, metal
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



Gene Fenn
Cover photograph for *Junior Bazaar*, October 1944, with object by Isamu Noguchi



Senoufo maker (Côte d'Ivoire)
Chair
Wood
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



Rocking Chair from Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring* 1944 (cast 1985)
Bronze



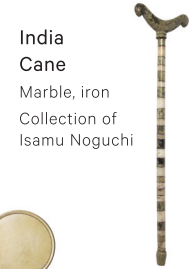
Arnold Eagle
Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring*, c. 1944
Photographic prints



Performance copy of Isamu Noguchi's set for Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring* 1944 (date of fabrication unknown)
Choreography by Martha Graham
Costumes by Edythe Gilfond
Music composed by Aaron Copland
Courtesy of Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance, Inc.



Japan
Fan
Paper, bamboo
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



India
Cane
Marble, iron
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



Japan
Samurai Menpo (facial armor)
Iron
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



Senoufo maker (Côte d'Ivoire)
"Prestige" chair
Wood
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



Mogens Koch
Paver's stool
Stained beechwood
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



Performance copy of *Lyre* for George Balanchine's *Orpheus*, 1948 (date of fabrication unknown)
Resin, balsa wood, wood, paint
Courtesy of New York City Ballet Archives, Ballet Society Collection



Adjustable Sculpture 1962
Bronze, gold patina



Snapline
Wood
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



Drum
Leather, wood, iron
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



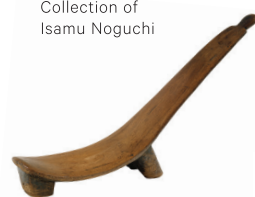
Comb
Wood
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



I am a Shamisen 1962
Bronze



Lega maker (Congo)
Stool
Wood
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



Lobi maker (Burkina Faso/ Côte d'Ivoire)
Chair
Wood
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



Lobi maker (Burkina Faso/ Côte d'Ivoire)
Portable stool
Wood, string
Collection of Isamu Noguchi

Fin Stools (Rudder Stools) 1944 (Vitra reissue 2002)
Wood, metal
Private collection



Cyclone Table (Knoll-312), 1957
Plastic laminate, Finland birch plywood, chrome-plated steel, iron



Cow bell
Wood, metal
Collection of Isamu Noguchi



Bells
Metal, string, twine
Collection of Isamu Noguchi