

Kawamata Tadashi: The Urban Magician

By Iseki Masaaki



People's Garden by Kawamata Tadashi. Documenta 9, Kassel, 1992/used wood. Photo by +.
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The idea of the authenticity of the creative process is a step in the direction of the current international trend towards conceptual art. But it seems that in Kawamata's case he has been interested in the creative process from his earliest years.

This idea suggests an always unfinished completion inherent in the stage of production captured by an installation. Kawamata has continued with similar projects, creating structures by piling wooden materials. When his projects are set in urban spaces where the eye expects to meet high-rise buildings, they fly in the face of public interest and utility and provide instead a rare, alternative perspective. They call attention to the many ways city landscapes can be viewed, and reveal the tremendous hidden possibilities that lie within metropolitan

At first glance, it has the appearance of a construction site, or a heap of scrap wood. But upon closer inspection you will see that the construction is never finished; the precariously balanced pile of wood scraps never seems to fall.

What is it? Viewers of this installation-like work will have a hard time trying to figure it out, or indeed if it is even a work of art.

In 1988, artist Kawamata Tadashi published a collection of his recent decade of work in a book entitled *Under Construction: Kawamata* in which he writes, "What I am doing is a kind of live art that captures the passing of time in the form of an ongoing operation. The process of making something like this is very real. I always work in joint projects, what is made doesn't come just from one person's consciousness but from an amalgamation of the consciousness of many people. ... That is a lot more authentic than just working from my own narrow aesthetic."



Construction site project Nove de Julho Caçapava São Paulo, 1987/scrap by Kawamata Tadashi. Photo by +.
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Project on Roosevelt Island New York, 1992/scrap (wood, metal, etc.) by Kawamata Tadashi. Photo: Kashiwagi Hisayasu.
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spaces. Kawamata Tadashi is an urban magician.

Many of Kawamata's exhibitions have drawn acclaim: an installation project surrounding the Japan Hall with scrap wood at the 1982 Venezia Biennale; a construction of "unfinished completion" atop the ruins of a destroyed urban building at the 1987 São Paulo Biennale; shacks suggestive of Vietnamese farmhouses positioned on either side of a stream at the 1992 "Documenta" exhibition in Kassel, Germany; and the giant Roosevelt

Island project near New York City in 1992.

The Roosevelt Island project, a construction of wood scraps that extended around the ruins of Smallpox Hospital, took more than six years and the cooperation of many Americans and Japanese to plan and complete. The project was an expression of the unique convergence of a time (the ruins) and a place (the current existence of the ruins), and was the object of social and political debate, as well as, for Kawamata, a very personal statement.

The artist's elegant structure was a lyrical message to the inhabitants of New York that was relayed from quiet Roosevelt Island to the ever-noisy streets of New York that lie opposite it.

Kawamata Tadashi the Magician creates miracles that transform urban landscapes, and he continues to work his magic all over the world. 

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