From Issue 19:
The Space of Ableism

VIEW

INTRODUCTION: ABSTRACT NORMATIVE BODIES VS. ANTI-ABLEIST ARCHITECTURES

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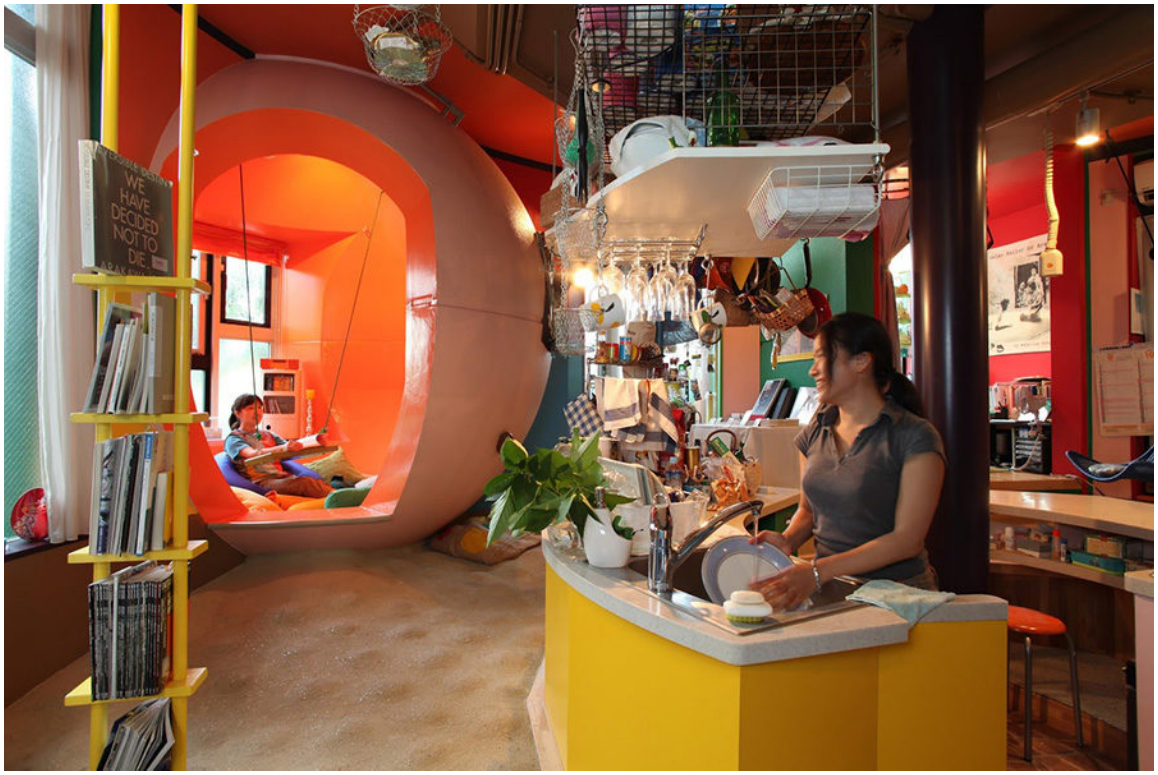
Welcome to the nineteenth issue of The Funambulist, which begins the fourth year of its existence as a magazine. This volume is dedicated to a political struggle that has been too seldom addressed throughout the pages of past issues and that nevertheless very much mobilizes “the politics of space and bodies” that The Funambulist proposes to discuss: the fight against ableism. This choice of words is important: rather than invoking disability rights or “inclusiveness” — a concept that goes against the editorial line of this issue, as we will see further — we favor the notion of ableism as the key object of investigations here. Just like structural racism should be addressed through considerations about white supremacy, and homophobia through considerations about heteronormativity, we should not consider disabled bodies without the system that creates such a category in the first place, namely ableism. In other words, disability, as we understand it in this issue (and as some of us experience it) is not an anatomic, biological, or neurological condition but, rather, a political one.



“Reversible Destiny Lofts Mitaka – In Memory of Helen Keller,” by Arakawa and Madeline Gins in Tokyo. / Photographs by Masataka Nakano, courtesy of Arakawa+Gins Tokyo Office.

Although ableism finds other means of embodiment than its spatial ones, the built environment remains a particularly crucial dimension of the way it implements itself on bodies. As such, it seemed particularly important to dedicate to it an entire issue (and perhaps others in the future) of a magazine that investigate the political relationship between space and bodies. Its readership being partially composed by designers, architects and urban planners whose offices are often in the position of being legally required to address questions of accessibility, it appears non-negligeable to remind them that the fight against ableism cannot be limited to this, no matter how important these questions are. Perhaps, a potent way to address it consists in considering the relationship between architecture design and the norm in general.

Architecture is always conceived through the consideration of abstract bodies — the future “users.” As Sarah Gunawan reminds us in her article (pp 22-27), the figures used by architects to represent these abstract bodies in their drawings and renderings can already tip us off about how this abstraction is almost always overlapping normativity. We can, of course, think of the various explicitation of this normative abstract body around which architecture is calibrated: Ernst Neufert’s hyper-dimensioned figures, Le Corbusier’s golden-proportionate

Modulor, or Henry Dreyfuss' "engineered humans," Joe and Josephine, as we often did in the online and printed pages of The Funambulist. However, this process is at work in all architectures, regardless of whether it is made explicit or not. In the quasi-totality of cases — oftentimes, it is even enforced by codes and laws — the abstract body (or bodies) around which architecture is calibrated corresponds, not as much to the "average" body (as a certain interpretation of the norm seems to suggest) as to the embodiment of a dominating body in its societal context.

"Reversible Destiny Lofts Mitaka – In Memory of Helen Keller," by Arakawa and Madeline Gins in Tokyo. / Photographs by Masataka Nakano, courtesy of Arakawa+Gins Tokyo Office.

One way to analyze ableism in this context consists perhaps in examining how this abstract dominating body remains, by definition, abstract. By this, I mean that, although this figure is constructed by identifiable markers (such as, whiteness, maleness, heteronormativity, health, and what we may start to call "ableness"), actual bodies cannot fully overlap with this abstraction. Of course, this is not an argument advocating that all bodies are, somehow, disabled in comparison to this abstract body; there are clear identifiable categories of bodies that benefit from this system and others that are constrained by it. Yet, rather than

simply establishing two distinct and definitive groups of bodies categorized as able and disabled, it is important to make these categories more complex by insisting instead on the degree of separation each body maintains with the calibrating abstract body. Because the built environment is calibrated on this abstract normative body, this degree of separation corresponds to the proportionality of violence bodies experience in relation to most of their designed physical surroundings. A body considered (or self-identified) as disabled is therefore a body whose physical and/or psychological (invariable or ephemeral, visible or invisible) features embody such a degree of separation from calibrating bodies that a categorical threshold has been reached.

Only few architecture practices challenge this normative essentialization of bodies through their work. In her article (pp 32-39), Jos Boys showcases some of them, but the work I would like to invoke here, is one regularly described in the pages of The Funambulist, as well as featured on this issue's cover and through the words of Adrienne Hart interviewed further (pp 50-55): the work of Shusaku Arakawa and Madeline Gins. Through their artistic and architectural practice, they have indeed challenged normative processes through denial of the knowledge produced by the norm — what we usually would not even call "knowledge" since the norm makes it obvious. Nothing explains this better in my opinion than the following quote by Director of Arakawa+Gins Tokyo office Momoyo Homma, interviewed in The Funambulist 7 (*Health Struggles*, September-October 2016), while describing the space of Arakawa and Gins' Mitaka Lofts (see photographs on previous page): "I took my mother here. She's disabled, she cannot walk without her cane. But, when she was here, she said, 'Well I don't need my cane here, because this floor is so secure for me. I can feel like my feet, each foot, is grabbing each bump. I love this floor!'"

“Reversible Destiny Lofts Mitaka – In Memory of Helen Keller,” by Arakawa and Madeline Gins in Tokyo. / Photographs by Masataka Nakano, courtesy of Arakawa+Gins Tokyo Office.

Beyond the qualitative comment on Arakawa and Gins’ architecture, what lies in Homma’s mother’s affirmation is the logic of ableism itself (and the lack thereof in this case). The cane constitutes a mundane object, often associated with aging bodies in what is perceived as a helping prop against the decapacitating effects of time. Recognizing the cane as a marker of ableism does not deny the biological and anatomic entropic effects of what we call “age”; it reveals instead that these effects constitute only a disability to the extent that the built environment is designed around bodies that are significantly less affected by these effects. In other words, a cane does not constitute an object designed to cope with age but, rather, one designed to cope with ableist spaces. As such, Homma’s mother not necessitating a cane when walking in Arakawa and Gins’ Mitaka Lofts should not be read as a sort of biblical reactivation of some of her anatomical capacities, but simply as the attenuation of ableist forces that the built environment almost always impose on her body.

One of the most important lessons to take from Arakawa and Gins’ architecture is the fact that it does not argue for “inclusiveness.” It does not propose a space adapted to numerous body types; instead, it attempts to deny as much as possible the essentializing knowledge of bodies that the norm produces. While inclusiveness constitutes a paradigm in which bodies that present a significant degree of differentiation from the normative abstract body are “generously” authorized to claim a place within the norm (which usually requires from them a form of allegiance), the struggle against ableism and other forms of normative violence dedicates its efforts in the abolition of the domination of some essentialized bodies over other essentialized bodies — however explicit or induced this domination takes form. With this in mind, I wish you an excellent read of the following articles, interview, and projects.