

# depression as a high- powered lens for art

w/Kyohei Sakaguchi

[part of 'art' conversations series for summer art,  
not-school <http://small-workshop.info/sans2016/>]

Kyohei Sakaguchi is a Japanese polymath, mainly known as an artist, writer, and Founder and Prime Minister of Japan's New Government. He has authored over 13 books, including Zero-Yen House, Kyohei Sakaguchi's Diary of Manic-Depression, and Theory for Escaping Reality. This conversation presents a reading of Chapter 3 from the English version of his best-selling book "How to Make an Independent Nation" as a jump-off point for talking about depression and creativity – Two topics of intense interest for Mairangi Bay and Auckland Super City.

**1: How to Use the Lens of Despair** (Chapter 4:3 from unpublished English version of 独立国家のつくりかた [How to Build an Indie Nation] by Kyohei Sakaguchi)

**2: Kyohei Sakaguchi: Commentary On My Works to Date** (translation: Chris Berthelsen)

This pamphlet, a audio reading of "How to Use the Lens of Despair", and a document of the 'art' conversation can be downloaded at <http://small-workshop.info/sans2016/>



[drawing: Kyohei Sakaguchi]

# 1

## How to Use the Lens of Despair

Kyohei Sakaguchi

(Chapter 4:3 from unpublished English version of 独立国家のつくりかた [How to Build an Indie Nation])

### Depression as a Starting Point

As I have mentioned before, when I am in depression, I feel totally hopeless. People around me laugh and wonder what I am getting so serious over, but for me, I am in despair. Despair for the people who have lost their lives during the disaster, for those who have lost loved ones, and even those who have lost their homes. Despair over the current state of society, over rubbish politics, and over the fact that the skilled people are all working corporate jobs instead of doing what they should be doing.

At the same time, I turn on myself, saying “Look at yourself before agonizing over others! You call yourself an architect but you haven’ t even built a house. You’ re an author but you don’ t read books, you haven’ t received any awards and you call yourself an artist but hate museum openings. When it comes down to it, you’ re just impudent and foolish!” I would blame myself, saying “When you get depressed, you lose even money!” And in the end, I start the thinking process where I declare my life is not worth living, and in which case, why not just die.

When I am depressed, my wife comes home every day worried that she might find me on the ground in front of our apartment. I cannot apologize to her enough.

Since I am unable to do anything, my hands are completely idle at home. But since the only thing to come my way is the thought of suicide, it is quite exhausting. And with all of that gravity weighing down on me, I use my free time to restart my thinking process. In the long run, when my period of depression comes to an end, I realize that this thinking process it gave birth to ends up being the guideline and text book for my next move. At the time, however, I am desperate. I am thinking for the sake of not dying.

This period actually started in August of 2011 and lasted for four months. The time before that, it lasted for the whole year of 2008. I am down for one year and then it skips two. Going on this calculation, the next one should be in about eight months. It seems as though

I can hold off until the summer of 2012. In which case, I make my schedule up until then. Basically, instead of looking at a year long calendar, I renew my life plan using my body as the starting point.

#### The Waking of the Lens of Despair

To say that I like having suicidal thoughts would be a misleading choice of words, however even so, when I am in that kind of condition, in other words when I am hopeless, I interpret it not as “losing all hope” but rather as “abandoning all hope.” This way, despair becomes a proactive act. Well, it may just be a play on words, but when you do this, an objective appears. It becomes a path you’ ve decided to take.

When I lose hope like this, I go to the library.

When I am in Tokyo, it is the Metropolitan Central Library in Hiroo. Now it is the Kumamoto Prefectural Library. I read things like art history and follow history all the way from Ancient Egyptian times. Interesting things happen when you do this. You learn to tell the difference at a glance between art meant to change society and compromising art made with the intention to be entertainment for others. And also whether a drawing on a wall is just a scribble, or an artistic piece containing a deeper spatial construct.

When the lens of despair (the point of view of this man who has lost all hope) becomes clear, then nearly everything in the world turns grey. Of course this is simply a symptom of depression. All it is, is a malfunctioning of the brain’ s area. Thanks to that, I am no longer moved by anything. People call that a disorder. Yet thanks to that, when you lay your eyes on something genuinely astonishing, the lens of despair, like a computer, reacts so precisely, without the slightest hint of a glitch.

Wishing to die. Being in despair. They are in actuality a strength.

Yet they are not a strength of bringing about an action. It is a strength that turns you into a big lens. In other words, instead of a world of action, you enter into a world of spectating and observing. You can tell at a glance the difference between art and design work, between self expression and social realization. And then, like in the Wizard of Oz, behold a yellow brick road before you.

So perhaps I will go on living with thoughts of suicide until I die of old age. There is still no name for having thoughts of suicide. I would like to give a name to this unidentified mysterious strength someday. Naming - this is one of my works as well. I therefore feel that

people who do not have suicidal thoughts, or people who have had them in the past but have cured it with medicine and are now able to tolerate working at companies, are wasting potential. Losing that blowfish poison-like experience would be hard for me. I mean, that time right there is the only time that you can truly think about “what it means to live.”

### When You Want to Die, Observe

My new government, unlike the current government, is determined to decrease the number of suicides. Zero suicides is the pillar of my new government's policies. I have lost a few friends to suicide as well. And everyone decides that losing hope is something wrong, and tries to step further away from it. That's why we end up with people who can only carry out politics in a dreary flavor-less way.

But we do have flavor. We have unique melodies. Real people do.

I only look at the flavor in people. What kind of flavor they have. What kind of flavor they suddenly change into just by sprinkling a pinch of black pepper. I wonder whether they are people who taste better raw, grilled or boiled. Let us do some cooking. The ingredients cannot cook themselves. Others must do the cooking. That is human relationship.

That's why you shouldn't hide the flavor of you, an ingredient. If you are having suicidal thoughts, you might as well say that you do. Of course it is embarrassing to come out to people and say that you are in a state of depression. However, that is my flavor. Each reader cooks me in their own way. They offer me words of kindness, sometimes work, and sometimes even money.

So, when you are having thoughts of suicide, how about using that lens to take a good hard look at society and seriously think over what you can do to change it. If anything, it is an excellent way to kill time. Since you're depressed, you have a lot of it. And it doesn't cost money. Let us do things that do not cost money. Let us at least be able to think of ways to get a grasp on the minimal amount of money we need.

The lens of despair will give you a strict and critical eye.

The satisfaction that you were able to have in saying you like design work will change into a sole interest in “art” that contains deep space and incites revolution in the thinking process. That is your chance. Don't feel that you need to take notes, just look. That is

where it starts. **People die because they try to take action when they want to die.**

The lens of despair will teach you that money serves no purpose. The act of thinking costs zero yen. Thanks to this, I do not spend money on having fun. Basically I am aware that you do not actually need money in order to live. Though I am aware that making that a reality, of course, will take some time.

When I want to die, I conclude that “I am Sen No Rikyū [Japanese tea master from the 16th century].” I do nothing. Just as Sen No Rikyū found “wabi-sabi” in the rust[sabi] of old metal, all I do is look. Here is your chance. The Lens of despair is not the sort of thing that appears in a life time. It appears only when you are on the brink of death.

**When you want to die, do not make art, look for art.** Any doctor will tell you that a symptom of depression is the lack of drive to do anything, that you are no longer moved by what you see. But I think that is wrong. **If you have no drive to do anything, you must not act. If you are not moved, it means that your critical eye is that much tuned.**

So instead of saying that you’ re depressed, why not call it Sen No Rikyū syndrome? You may just smell the wafts of a new lifestyle by nonchalantly saying, “I am kind of feeling Sen No Rikyū-ish today.” Even with that said, **what is there to do about this immense number of suicides. Thinking normally, 30,000 a year is absurd. I suspect that this has a deep connection with art.**

### **Make a Layer**

When you use your lens of despair to spectate on your own “life,” on the “art” born throughout history up until now, and on this society you are included in, you realize that the layers mix amongst each other in a variety of aspects.

**During a manic state, which feels like being in love, you are able to create many layers. You become aware of many good things, and you can encounter things like instinctive interests that you didn’ t even know you had.**

You then **take a good look at these layered structures of your mentality and observe them when you are in depression. You will find that there are many intersecting points,** just like a Minakata Mandala. This then becomes a hint to manifest your own mission. In this fashion, many intersections form inside the concept city within your consciousness. Just as we understand from the cities we live in, people gather at intersections. **Intersections become**

places unlike regular streets, possessing a certain energy.

When I think like this, the layers that do not intersect with others end up reminding me of the back alleys in India that I grew to like for their peculiar textures. I adventure through the city in my mind like this. It's a very enjoyable task. The more you do it, the more it comes at you with a three-dimensional and spatial reality.

The lens of despair, as you can see, has the ability to dissect and analyze your own concept city.

It promptly awakens the feelings that were neglected in your subconscious, and can edit, repair, and reconnect them.

There is really no such a thing as a bad time in terms of the human mind.

Properly analyze the phenomena around you in high resolution, and you will find that they always function as helpful suggestions to continue living. If you don't do this properly, then you will easily believe what other people say. If you compromise and tell yourself that is all you amount to, then you become subjected to "isms." You end up substituting your principle of living. Capitalism, communism, academic elitism, monetarism, common sense-ism, you can make anything into an "ism."

This doesn't involve any thinking. You end up living a subconscious and automated life that is not your own.

"i-zoom" over ism. That's what I say. I substitute capitalism with capitali-zoom. Instead of falling into a capitalistic thinking, it is the act of consciously thinking about what capitalism really is. In other words, it is the act of magnifying the resolution, as if you were "zooming" in on an image in Photoshop. By doing this, you give birth to "doubt" and the "question" of "why," as opposed to being sucked into the principles contained in the isms.

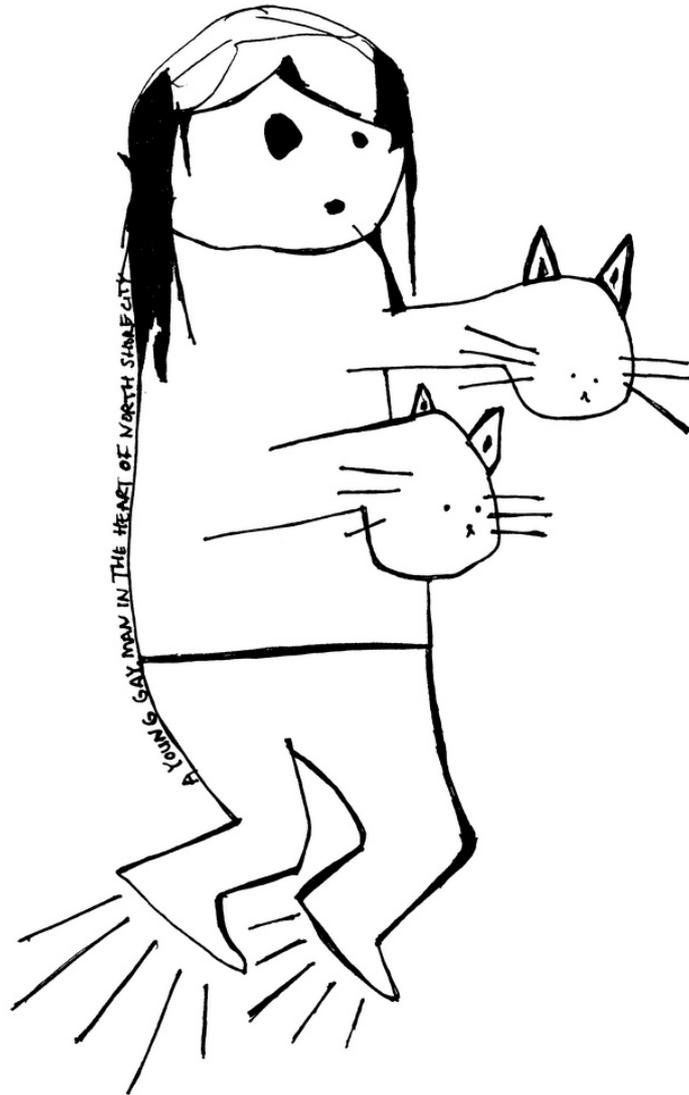
Let's be done with this ism-skism game. From now on, it's "izoom."

Carefully observe, while magnifying the resolution on the situation you are placed in. But look at it abstractly at the same time, taking it to the realms of conceptual art. Confront this concrete living using abstract conceptual thinking. Pay attention to words. Pay attention to certain events. And then understand the use and the meaning within the singular [anonymous] layer, and translate them into your own personal layer. What is needed for this is an abstract thinking process. However, that alone will not make it permanent. The key

to doing this not abstract. It is your very hands. This isn' t difficult at all. For example, you may have a movie poster on your wall, Minoru Furuya' s comic series *Shigatera* in a row next to a tasteful selection of philosophy books on your shelf, and vintage clothing on the rack next to your waiter' s uniform. You may display things of various tastes, some uncool and others refined, together with other things you' ve liked since you were a kid. Yes, that right there, that is your layer! Your layer is made up of all the things you already like. Now\_that you are feeling depressed and down in the dumps, this is a chance for you to observe your own layer (your room) to confirm your attitude\_from square one.

Whenever I get stuck, I go back to finding my layer. People may accuse me of decorating concepts with convincing words. But what I have come to realize from experience is that the very act of trying things is in fact already an attitude. At a glance it may seem like a waste of time, since it is not making any money, but the process will surely get conveyed to others. The trading in Attitude Economics continues to occur even when you' re depressed and despaired while curled up in your blankets. At my high school graduation, the principal had this to say: "Petty waste is nothing but a waste, but grandiose waste becomes a big asset."

Now let' s happily get to work putting this grandiose waste, called "thinking," into practice - although it will not make any money.



[drawing: Chris Berthelsen]

## 2

### Kyohei Sakaguchi: Commentary On My Works to Date

[Kyohei Sakaguchi | trans. Chris Berthelsen]

#### 1. Zero-Yen House (Little More, 2004)

This is my first book, based on my graduation dissertation on research into the dwellings of people living on the streets. After graduating from university I went 'independent' but most of the time I had no idea what I was doing. I had this idea of publishing my graduation dissertation but had absolutely zero insider knowledge or connections. And I, who had never even read many books, had no idea about publishers. So I showed a friend from high school my book and asked for help finding a publisher. The answer was that "No one but Little More would touch it". I brought it to them, and weirdly enough, after just ten minutes the decision to publish was made. There's nothing but risk involved when publishing the photo collection of an unknown guy, but that's what they did for me. The first round of royalties totaled zero yen because the contract stipulated that I would be paid royalties from the second addition onwards. As a tradeoff, I put forward the condition that an English translation be included and they gave me 50,000 to do it. I took this money, went to Aoyama Gakuin University where my little brother was a student, and asked a female student who was studying English literature to do the translation. After publication I took this book and went on a sales trip overseas, to Paris, London, Frankfurt and all over; all at my own expense.

#### 2. Tokyo Zero-Yen House Zero-Yen Lifestyle (Daiwa Shobo 2008)

Even after publishing the above book I saw no increases in work, and I spent all my time working at my part-time job. Even so, every spare minute I had I spent outside conducting my fieldwork. And then one day, by the banks of the Sumida River I met Suzuki-san, a man that most people would call homeless. I was so excited to meet for the first time someone who had constructed their dwelling with a budget of zero yen that I spent every day documenting him (well, really, drinking and hanging out with him). I turned this into my first ever paid publication in my life, after the editor of AERA gave me five pages to fill up as I saw fit. This was the impetus for my first attempt at writing a book. I never imagined that I would be a writer. This was just at the time when we were expecting our first child. We had no savings and I had just quit my part-time job. While feeling great unease about the future I frantically wrote the 350 page manuscript for this book in one and a half months. While at the time I thought that this book was a non-fiction account of Suzuki-san's zero-yen lifestyle I now think that it perhaps is actually story that I wrote while I was possessed by Suzuki-san's spirit.

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### 3. The Edison of Sumida River (Aoyama Publishing, 2008)

In the process of writing Tokyo Zero-Yen House Zero-Yen Lifestyle I had the experience of doing a job which was in tune with my body for the first time. When writing a book, more and more ideas flow into my mind. Experiences and memories from the past show themselves in different ways, and come at you from new angles. While writing the reportage of Suzuki-san I was overcome by the desire to write the story as a kind of tale, or legend. This 350 page book was written in two months, straight after I finished writing the previous one, with no break in between. The finished work is a novel of a totally fictitious world where all of the people from my fieldwork are all mixed up together. Four years later my wife, who doesn't really read much read this book and commented "I can't think of this as anything other than a story about us." That wasn't really my intention but anyway...

This novel and the previous book become the source works for the film directed by Yukihiro Tsutsumi.

### 4. Tokyo One-Mat Inheritance (Shunjusha 2009)

As I got used to writing, it may have appeared like I had acquired some techniques of living longer, but I soon got stuck.

At this time I still didn't know what I should be writing about. I claimed I was an architect, but created no buildings. I claimed I was a writer, but couldn't really produce novel after novel. As such, I just roamed the streets every day, under the guise of doing fieldwork. This book is dedicated to the 'space that can't be seen but which hides the potential for infinite expansion' that I encountered during those dark days of roaming. At the time it didn't sell at all but what I wrote here opened up possibilities for me soon after. Also, this was the book that was written when my manic-depressive symptoms, which I was to later go public with, were at their worst. At the time I had almost no income and even though I had one daughter our family had just 40,000 yen in savings. Even so, I decided not to quit. For me, this book proved to be a turning point. Inocchi (Yoshihiko Inohara from the group V6) read this book and emailed me personally. At first I thought it must have been a joke and replied by asking whoever it was to stop mocking me. After I confirmed that the email was real, it came to be that he produced a stage version of the book.

### 5. Urban Hunter-Gather Lifestyle From Zero (Ohta Publishing Co. 2010)

2010 was a year of big changes for me. Naohiro Ukawa started the USTREAM programme DOMMUNE and I met Kageo Umeyama a.k.a. Kowloon Joe who was to become an important mind in my future. This was the year where I came to be deeply involved with writers of my generation such as the music writer Ryo Isobe, the philosopher Ataru Sasaki, and Naoki Ishikawa, Toshiki Okada, and others. In the midst of all that, this is the first work produced with Kageo Umeyama,

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who was working as an editor at Ohta Publishing at the time. This is a very important book, where I was able to grapple with my original theme of how we perceive space, from the perspective of an investigation of the lifestyles and dwellings of people that would generally be called 'homeless'. This is the book where terms such as 'layer' and 'resolution' that I came to use in later books came into being. As the book began to slowly start to sell I was finally able to make a living solely from writing for the first time.

## **6. How to Make an Indie Nation (Kodansha Gendai-Shinsho)**

During the internet programme DOMMUNE, which started up after I had finished writing the book above, I raised the issue of nuclear power generation. That was on the 4th of March, 2011. At that time Tetsunari Iida, who at that time was the director of the Institute for Sustainable Energy Policies in Japan said that the power plant in Fukushima was dangerous, and he said that the real danger of a meltdown was from a tsunami, not an earthquake. Exactly one week later the 2011 earthquake and tsunami hit Eastern Japan. At that time I was living in Kunitachi in Tokyo and I felt like I was in a dream when I saw the Fukushima power plant looking like it was going to blow up on the 12th of March. I remembered that Iida-san had said to me on March the 4th that if it did blow up then people should evacuate to a radius of 300km so I pack up my family and moved back to Kumamoto. My wife's comment that we were now in a state of anarchy further propelled me to found the New Government on the 10th of May and take up office as its president. Ah, thinking back on it now I find it amazing that I did such an insane thing, but it's the truth that both my life and my writing changed because of it. I was miraculously able to finish this book, which is the culmination of all my previous work, just moments before my manic-depression went off the rails and I became unable to operate. It is, however, also the best selling book of my career (60,000 units published).

## **7. Concept City (Nitto Shoin 2013)**

This is a collection of drawings and other things that I created between the end of 2012 through to the following year, the bulk of which was published as the catalogue to my solo exhibition at the Watari Museum of Contemporary Art in Aoyama, Tokyo. For the years after the publication of Zero-Yen House, before I started to write, I was able to scratch out a living through art exhibitions overseas and interacting with a small number of collectors that had met in Canada. In Japan, however, my artworks were of interest to pretty much no one. Only Watarium had showed continued interest in me since my 2004 debut. As my thinking had slowly matured I had come to understand that my drawings have a large influence on my writing but I hadn't really had the opportunity to present that in any way. Watarium's unprecedented offer of their whole facility for the exhibition was an opportunity to synthesize previously disparate aspects of my artwork, writing, thought, action and sickness, the result being this book.

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### **8. Age of Illusions (Gentosha 2013)**

With my mania-power at its fullest I made it through the first half of 2012 only to fall into a long and deep depression. It always comes after I've been wildly enthusiastic about something; then the sweats and chills of hell move in. Unable to move, I lay on my futon thinking about when I should end my life. On one of these days, when I had pretty much decided to die, I was mulling things over in a small room in a cheap hotel in Aoyama when a twenty minute flash of memory from when I was four came to me in a vivid form. The book that this incident became the start of is a weird kind of book that can be both a novel and an autobiography. It's a book which puts to paper a several hundred meter walk with my mother from my house to my kindergarten. I'm surprised that such a book would even get published. Even so, this was the impetus for me to start writing novels and the style that I worked out in this book has become my axis. Even now, I regard this as my masterpiece (even though almost no one bought it...). For the first time in my life I experienced a change in awareness through the act of writing, and for this reason it is a book I treasure. Read it!

### **9. Mobile House (Shueisha Shinsho 2013)**

I started with investigating people that society would call 'homeless', but I felt that the essential next step was for me to begin experimenting with it myself. This book has its roots in the 2010 article 'How to Make a Mobile House' that was published in the art magazine Subaru. This is the tale of how, under the tutelage of The Robinson Crusoe of the Tama River – an old man who had lived by the Tama River for over 20 years – I built a mobile house and lived in it in a parking lot in the Tokyo suburb of Kichijoji. While I was writing this book the 2011 earthquake and tsunami hit Eastern Japan, I set up my New Government, and wrote How to Make an Indie Nation. This means that the process of building mobile houses is the genesis of my work to found the New Government and push even further forward. Even now, I think this book can be read as the tale of the fairytale character of The Robinson Crusoe of the Tama River. Through this kind of process, I first began to experience a kind of roaming in the interstices between fiction and non-fiction.

### **10. Kyohei Sakaguchi's Diary of Manic-Depression (Igaku Shoin 2013)**

The manic-depressive cycle that became increasingly extreme from 2012 enveloped not just myself but my whole family, and become impossible to control. I felt that I needed to create some kind of technological innovation in order to somehow reign in this terrible beast. My whole family got together to discuss how to work manage my manic-depression, a disability of the brain for which there is no complete cure. The conclusion we came to was to not treat it, but to try to savor it. And so every day I recorded delusions and facts, all mixed up together, constructing it in the style of a novel. Before I knew it, I had produced over

800 pages. I then remembered how the weird editor Masaaki Shiraishi, who created the 'Opening Up Care' series for Igaku Shoin, once asked me to write a first-person research account of manic-depression. I sent him the manuscript. Shiraishi-san read the diary of my efforts to try to interact with my family while at the same time totally refusing any attempts to cure my manic-depression and then burst out laughing. In this way the whole thing, with almost no editing, was published as this book. The boundary-blurring of fiction and non-fiction that started in Age of Illusions becomes even more intense here. Here I had the experience of getting to grips with my own style of writing, and this book was printed like the vestiges scratches. This book also contains drawings of my wife, daughter and son. I wrote this as a modern-day version of Journey to the West.

### **11. The Adventures of Kyohei Sakaguchi (Doyosha 2014)**

It was ten years since my publishing debut with Zero-Yen House. I had staked my claim as an architect who doesn't build, and having no real idea how to move forward, time seemed to float on by... but somewhere along the line I had produced around 20,000 pages of text. That is to say, this was the year when I first reached that conclusion that I may be a 'writer'. It was at this time that I was asked whether I would be interested in turning my diary from ten years ago (the one on my website) into a book. That was a time when my chaotic thoughts had not been put in order. I flew around the world, meeting people, encountering music, films, and books, and constantly seeking my mission. It was that kind of bittersweet adolescence. I was just a twenty-five year old youngster scuttling about Paris and London trying to sell Zero-Yen House, which has just been published. I wrote in my diary almost continuously over the seven year period from 2004 to 2011 and I plan to publish The Adventures of Kyohei Sakaguchi as seven volumes in total.

### **12. Roaming Taxi (Shinchosha 2014)**

After writing the research-based Edison of Sumida River, and the near-autobiographical Age of Illusions, this year saw my first novel. Up until now, I guess that I would say that up until this point I had been chasing the wild and extraordinary but this the heart of this book is at the everyday scale, that which is not normally recorded in photos or videos. The impetus for this book was an experience I had when I was still at high school. My great-grandmother, who actually lived in Kumamoto, was trying to get to Yamaguchi Prefecture (a long way away!) At that time, the whole family thought she had lost her marbles, and they didn't really pay attention to her. But this lady who was trying to get to Yamaguchi Prefecture stayed embedded in my memory. One day, I decided to set up a taxi company to take elderly people with dementia to the fantastical places that they wanted to go. I presented my business plan to my wife. Her reply was "I told you before, right? You will not start any businesses. If you want to start a business then you should write a book about it." I started writing

straight away. I wanted to bring my deceased great-grandmother and great-grandfather back into physical form through the writings on the page. In this book I investigate how to express my thought and perceptions spatially, and is also where I had just started introducing the concepts of 'revision' and 'refinement' into my writing process. It's a pretty interesting book. You should definitely read it.

### **13. Theory of Escaping Reality (Kodansha Gendai-Shinsho 2014)**

Why do I write? Why do I create? And why do I try to convey all this to other people? Feeling that I wanted to explore this mystery, I started writing.

I'm certain that everyone has experienced the elasticity of space and time at least once, in their youth. When I was an elementary school student Sunday mornings were slow and viscous flows. The park I played in when I was young now seems tiny. The smell rising from asphalt after the rain can bring forth memories of a sunset I saw long ago. Somewhere along the line, these kinds of thoughts become fossilized as childhood memories and we place them to the side as 'not real'. I view this phenomenon on the same level as ecological destruction. The reason I became an architect was that I was excited by myself when I was a child, when I was able to feel this kind of invisible space. To notice the sprouts of space, which have been pruned from the realm of reality, and to keep on watering it; that's the behaviour that I call 'to think', the nest that I call 'thought'. I have continued to transform, from Zero-Yen House through to Roaming Taxi. This new work is the product of six years of writing on the source of this creation. Please do read it.

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[in collaboration with Mairangi Arts Centre, provided with support of Creative Communities Scheme]



[translation for section three with support of NZJEP Grant]

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