Study for Blank, 1980-81
How do we begin to think about thinking? If we use language to express our thoughts we rapidly discover that language itself does not accurately represent the fullness of our sensations, intuitions and ideas. Nor can language really identify that source of thought which we call the mind.

Japanese-born artist Shusaku Arakawa is aware of the shortcomings of language and language-based thought. Since his arrival in the United States in 1961 he has been attempting to map the thinking field, as he came to call it, by combining words, numbers, lines, shapes and colors in his works. He has created a prodigious number of paintings, prints and drawings, and, in collaboration with his wife, the poet Madeline Gins, he has also published a book and produced two films. Arakawa and Gins consider all of these works to be a part of an on-going investigation into the functions of the mind. They call this inquiry The Mechanism of Meaning.

Works by Arakawa are exhibited in two galleries on the museum's main floor: in the MATRIX space and in Gallery A107. In MATRIX, an early painting, Alphabet Skin (1965), is installed along with two recent works, a drawing entitled Study for Blank (1980-81) and a large, six-panel painting, Blank Stations II (1981-82). These works represent several stages in the development of The Mechanism of Meaning. A book of the same title, The Mechanism of Meaning, first published by Arakawa and Madeline Gins in German in 1971 and revised for the 1979 English edition, summarizes their research to that date. It is located at the entrance to MATRIX. A short distance from the MATRIX Gallery, in Gallery A107, the exhibition In Focus: "Stolen" spotlights the Athenaeum's own painting by Arakawa, Untitled (1969), and displays the documentation related to the unusual history behind this painting's acquisition.

Because Arakawa's works are about thought, they require a slightly different approach than most paintings. We need to make an effort to look at the paintings while at the same time thinking along with them. For example, in the painting Alphabet Skin we see the sparse outlines of a room and we subsequently want to fill in the missing information and fill out the content of the painting with our minds. Arakawa makes this process inevitable by providing us with suggestive but incomplete lines and shapes which appear next to stenciled words: FOOT, BED, CLOTHES, HUMAN SKIN. Depending on the order in which we read them, the words evoke a bedroom, a veiled eroticism, or even a slightly macabre scene.

Arakawa is fully conscious of the distance between words and the images they evoke in different people. Each person seeing the word FOOT will have a different idea of foot in mind. Thus each viewer constructs a totally unique and individual impression of the painting based on his or her own associations with the words and images set out on the canvas. By leaving gaps between words and images Arakawa engages viewers into a mental collaboration. The fantasies and intuitions which we infuse into the bare schemata of the painting seem as tangible as the painting itself. Alphabet Skin, like human skin, is only a surface stretched tautly over a multi-layered world replete with possibilities.

Not all of Arakawa's works however are this easy to get along with. The Untitled painting in Gallery A107 is a case in point. Stenciled at the bottom of the white canvas, below some drawings of a triangle, a scribble and two vertical lines, is the following sentence: IF POSSIBLE STEAL ANY ONE OF THESE DRAWINGS INCLUDING THIS SENTENCE. At the word THIS the sentence begins to fade away.

How are we expected to collaborate with a painting such as this one? The painted words seem to make sense, but what are they communicating in the context in
IF POSSIBLE STEAL ANY ONE OF THESE DRAWINGS INCLUDING THIS SENTENCE.

Untitled, 1969
which they appear? Are we as viewers being told to steal a drawing, i.e. the triangle, the scribble or the vertical lines? Or is it the sentence we should be trying to remove? An unknown force seems to be stealing the sentence already since the letters appear to be sinking into the surface of the canvas. Perhaps we should consider taking the whole painting since it includes both drawings and sentence. This may solve the problem but it is an act which has consequences more serious than most of us would care to risk.

By presenting us with this dilemma, Arakawa shakes our confidence in the logical function of language. Understanding the words without really grasping their meaning leaves us with a nagging sensation that something is not quite as it should be. This sensation, as difficult as it may be to pinpoint or to name, is nevertheless an integral part of our thought process.

The Untitled painting challenges the way we normally think and introduces us to the realm of paradox, nonsense and ambiguity. This realm is the source of laughter, poetry, fantasy and meditation. It is an aspect of thought we don't often have occasion to explore.

In the fall of 1969 a group of young art students from Rutgers University broke the tension which is created by the command in the Untitled painting. They stole the painting (and therefore the sentence and drawings with it) from its place on exhibition in the Dwan Gallery in New York City. After receiving a telegram from the students informing him: DRAWING SAFE--WORK COMPLETED...; Arakawa telegraphed back: WORK NOT EXACTLY COMPLETED. INTERESTING MISUNDERSTANDING, BUT THERE ARE STILL MANY WAYS TO EFFECT A REMOVAL AND VARIOUS DEGREES OF PASSION THROUGH WHICH TO STEAL...

He was in essence telling the students that their action was a narrowing down of the many possibilities which the work itself left open. The actual theft of the painting, even while it was seen by the students as an art statement in fact ran contrary to the artist's intent. But Arakawa recovered elegantly from the initial shock of having had his painting abducted. He instructed the young artists to donate the work to a public institution as "The Thieves," thus designing identities for the students and establishing a whole network of new possibilities.

The ensuing chain reaction of events is documented in the letters and telegrams from museum curators and directors. The responses display a broad range of attitudes, from stodgy formality to eager acquisitiveness.

Works like Untitled and Alpha-
Blank Stations II, 1981-82, (second three of six panels)

bet Skin are somewhat like painted riddles. They are meant to be played with, laughed with and twisted around in the mind. The more recent works in the exhibition, Study for Blank and Blank Stations II seem more serious. Visually rich and intellectually intriguing, these works do not tease in the same way as did, for example, the earlier Untitled. Instead, they invite meditation.

Too large ever to be encompassed in one glance, a work like Blank Stations II requires that we allow our eyes to drift over the surface, picking up images at random while we slowly decipher the written message. In Study for Blank layers of information and varying planes all appear to be floating in transparent glazes. Arakawa's works reflect the mind as it is when it constantly acts upon and interacts with the many types of data it receives. They are vertical interruptions, cross sections of the dynamic realm of thought where words, sensations, perceptions, instincts interweave and flow.

Out of the earlier experiments with The Mechanism of Meaning Arakawa has distilled in recent years an intuition about the source of meaning. This source, like the atom, is intangible but essential to the structure of our sense of being. Arakawa refers to it as Blank. The paintings hint at Tokyo. He studied medicine, bi-
ology, biochemistry and painting. Dissatisfied with the sciences and angry at the conservative Japanese art world, he began staging happenings. By the age of 20 he achieved notoriety as a radical artist whose work challenged traditional decorum. Although he terminated his involvement with happenings after emigrating to the United States in 1961, his art continued to invite unusual incidents as is clear from the case of the stolen painting now in the Atheneum's collection. Since that time Arakawa's work has become more introspective. He lives in New York City with his wife and collaborator Madeline Gins. Arakawa is represented by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City.

Danielle Rice
Curator of Education

casual manner. This informality reflects Arakawa's longstanding inclination to depart from traditional expectations.)

Study for Blank, 1980-81, pencil, colored pencil, watercolor on paper, 45" x 72". Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City.

Near the entrance to MATRIX:

In Gallery A107:
Untitled, 1969, oil on canvas, 72" x 48". Collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Telegrams, letters and other documentation relating to the theft and disposition of Arakawa's Untitled by Kathe Gregory, Marilyn Landis, Russell F. Lewis, David Crane, Scott R. Kahn, alias "The Thieves."

Stolen, introduction by Lawrence Alloway. Published by Colorcraft Lithographers, Dwan Gallery, and Multiples, Inc. (New York), 1970.

Works in MATRIX:
Alphabet Skin, 1965-66, oil, luminous paint, acrylic on canvas, 3 panels 94" x 60" each. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City.

Blank Stations II, 1981-82 acrylic on canvas, 6 panels 120" x 84" each. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York City. (Because the ceiling is low, the artist allowed the panels to be installed in a more

PLEASE NOTE: Arakawa will deliver a MATRIX lecture on Sunday, October 17, 1982 at 3:00 p.m.

On Sunday, September 26, 1982, composer and pianist Edvard Lieber will perform a new piece inspired by Arakawa's Blank Stations II and discuss painting as a source of inspiration in his music, at 3:00 p.m.
Within the specified region, some areas are in a state of activation, no areas are in a state of complete non-activity. All that which is currently nonactivated yet not non-active, that is, the sum of static activity, may be considered Blank. Even within specific activations there may be unspecified activities which also may contribute to the Blank.

As the coordination of the senses takes place within a blank, whatever it is that orders this coordination must also remain blank to us. Therefore, how can we knowingly speak of the coordination of the senses except in terms of Blank.

Part of doing is always Blank. Even those energies which lead us move blankly. What are commonly called feeling and thinking are such energies. As well as providing a place for "a forming Blank", these configurations of energy themselves move through Blank to make varying degrees of awareness or sometimes to remain in it, completely Blank.

The area of subject and the area of all other given's interflow through Blank and may neutralize each other within it. Blank itself, as the neutralizing area, may step into or onto subjectivity while at the exact same time forming the outside Given, changing it. As individuals form blanks, nature which is drawn on to provide something is shifted and changed.

Instantaneously and repeatedly, Blank serves as a station for our senses, making possible an impression of continuance. Subject comes to be formed in much the same way. And so Blank comes to be found thoroughly interspersed throughout Subject, forming an integral part of any act. When trying to bring it into focus, it must be remembered that Blank is widely dispersed, capable of behaving in many different ways at once, and itself plays a fundamental role in the act of focusing.

What occurs within a state of activation when a subject comes to perceive itself as behaving: blank?

the perceiving of oneself as blank

Void, Nothingness, Emptiness, Tabula Rasa, Vacuum. None of these quite covers what we wish to point out by the notion of "Blank".

First of all, Blank is above all a neutral positing--in the sense of holding open; it is what is there but undifferentiated, so it is not nothing; it can accumulate: it is not void. It probably has its own laws of operation, so it, itself, is not a "tabula rasa". It is what fills Emptiness. It may draw upon or feed whatever it is the vacuum is but is not identical with it.

Arakawa
Madeline Gins
1977-1982

* These texts appear also in Study for Blank and Blank Stations II.
Selected one-man exhibitions: Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, Japan '58; Galerie Schmela, Dusseldorf '63, '65, '66; Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles '64, '66, '67; Dwan Gallery, NYC '66, '67, '68; Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven '66; Galleria Schwarz, Milan '67, '69, '71; Yvon Lambert Galerie, Paris '69, '71, '75, '82; Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris '70; Venice Biennale '70; Kunsthalle, Hamburg The Mechanism of Meaning '72 (traveled extensively); Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, NYC '72, '74, '76, '79, '81; Museum of Modern Art, NYC '74; Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humblebaek, Denmark '74; Stadstische Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf '77; Galerie Maeght, Paris '77, '78, '82; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam '78; The Minneapolis Institute of Arts '79; Museum Seibu, Tokyo '79.

Selected group exhibitions: Hayward Gallery, London Pop Art '69; Documenta VI, Kassel, Germany '77; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago Words at Liberty '77; Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC Art About Art '78.

Selected bibliography by Arakawa and Madeline Gins:


Mechanismus der Bedeutung (The Mechanism of Meaning), with an introduction by Lawrence Alloway. Bruckmann (Munich) '71.

For Example (A Critique of Never), Alessandra Castelli Press (Milan) '74.


Arakawa. "Some Words," and Madeline Gins, "Arakawa's Intention (to point, to pinpoint, to model)" in Arakawa, Stadstische Kunsthalle (Dusseldorf) '77.


Selected bibliography about Arakawa:

Ballo, Guido. Arakawa, or the Power of Symbols. Galleria Schwarz (Milan) '67.


Calas, Nicolas. Arakawa's Unexpected Moves. Galleria Schwarz (Milan) '71.


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