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Sustainability  
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Creation

Zai Nomura

## Spontaneous Inspiration Based on the Skill of Observing the World Precisely Leads to Finding Points of Contact with Society

Zai Nomura, a contemporary Japanese artist based in the USA, has been collaborating since 2018 with IHI Corporation.

He gives lectures for IHI's in-house "artistic thinking" program, the second term of which recently ended. This program attracts many employees who are looking for clues to how to make things that have never existed before become a reality. Some participants say the program had enabled them to get ideas from a completely different angle.

This article presents an interview with Nomura, who has brought new perspectives from the art world to IHI.



### Zai Nomura

Zai Nomura is a contemporary artist born in 1979. He received his Ph.D. in Fine Arts from Musashino Art University in 2013 and his MFA from Goldsmiths, the University of London, in 2009. His major exhibitions include the following: "Echoes," Ulterior Gallery, NY (2021); Hamburg Private Residency, Hamburg, (2016); Aichi International Triennial "Rainbow Caravan," Aichi (2016); and "Continuous Temporality vol. 2," COEXIST-Tokyo Gallery (2015).

### Bridging the worlds of magic and humanity

"I intended to refuse IHI's offer to collaborate with me upon first receiving it," said Nomura. The first time IHI met with him was in 2018, when the plan for the establishment of Ignition Base (commonly called "i-Base") at IHI Yokohama Works was under way. i-Base opened in 2019 as a hub for promoting innovation and for the

occasion of its opening, Nomura produced an artwork to be exhibited there.

He was reluctant to collaborate as an artist with a company because certain examples of such collaborations that he had seen throughout his career seemed to him to involve both parties exploiting each other and having a superficial relationship. As such, he said that he would

only collaborate with IHI on condition that it would not interfere in his work. To his surprise, IHI readily agreed to this, which left him with no other option than to accept its offer. In the course of researching IHI's history and having numerous conversations with the company's members as preparation for the collaboration, he said he made the following realization:

“Artists are like the inhabitants of a magic world such as Hogwarts in *Harry Potter*, while the company called IHI seemed like exactly a representation of the human world in terms of producing useful objects such as bridges or aircraft engines. At first, I intended to refuse their offer for fear of becoming part of the human world and losing my magic. But after creating artwork with IHI, I found that I had not in fact lost anything. Actually, I learned more than I expected. As such, at present I believe one of my roles is bridging the worlds of magic and humanity.”

### Daily precise observation inspires me

On being asked what magic a contemporary artist uses to create things from out of nothingness and what he does think about during his daily activity as an artist, Nomura told us:

“Every day, I focus on how precisely I can concentrate on observing the world. For example, even during the five-minute walk from the station to your offices, what you see or feel will surely vary from day to day because the weather and your mood are different every day. More specifically, you may realize that a piece of trash that was here yesterday has now gone or that walking while listening to this kind of music makes you feel a certain way today. In my regular daily life, I challenge myself as to how much I can concentrate on listening to the sounds of the Earth and how many changes of the world I can witness. With this constant everyday routine, I can detect the subtle things in the world. And recognizing them raises questions such as how they relate to me and how I should interpret them.”

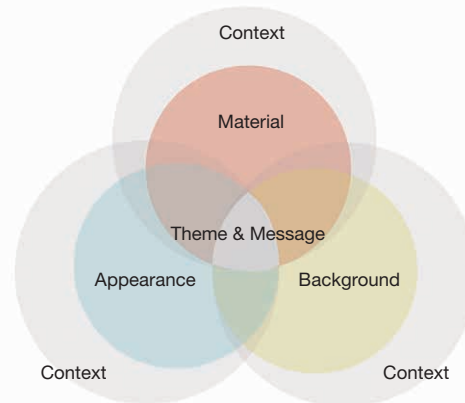
The result of this accumulation of observations is Nomura's artworks. The following is a typical day for him. He takes a 30-minute walk to his studio from his home in New York. On the way — actually, from the time he wakes up — he collects within himself his observations and feelings. On arriving at the studio, he opens a notebook and draws the images that have formed in his mind. This has been his custom for over 20 years.

Through the repetition of this process of making precise observations, Nomura is able to produce new ideas, unique messages, and other things that have never existed before. He believes that it is vital for artists to continually believe that their moment of inspiration will surely come. He elaborated on this as follows:

“I said that this was ‘magic’ but it is really training that anyone can do. I focus on observing the world, reflect on what I have observed, and then continue thinking. I keep myself in a condition in which I am always ready to express

### Functions of context in art according to Nomura's conception

#### + Context



myself artistically. As is the case with an athlete's training, neglecting this regime for even a day means I have to make a particular effort every day afterwards to regain the sense that I formerly had. The only thing I do every day without fail is observing each and every moment.” Nomura laughed and continued, “Even when I look like I am only standing still, my brain is working, full of awareness.”

### Finding the intersection between the personal and social axes

However, not everyone can become an artist who brings into reality things that no-one has created before. We wonder if the artistic process can provide researchers with any clues as to how to launch a project based on their ideas, with the goal of launching it into the world.

“Ideas must be generated from within oneself. A researcher should refine his or her ideas so much so that they become independent from the company. In addition to having their own unwavering axis, researchers need to learn deeply about the company's axis as well. Then, they need to look for the point where these two axes intersect. Finding the perfect intersection is difficult, but training in precise observation should prove to be useful in this process.”

The second term of the artistic thinking program, in which Nomura gives lectures to IHI researchers and employees in other types of work, has already finished. Through his lectures, the researchers are trying to improve by learning actively from him.

“When I first came to know members of IHI, I was surprised that there were so many experienced researchers in each field of technology. I believed then and still believe

now that IHI researchers can change the world if they put their minds to it! They have high levels of personal commitment with regard to their researches. But one thing I think they need to do is to improve their presentation skills. The skills I'm talking about is not speaking eloquently, but rather exploring and determining what the other side — that is to say IHI or society — needs, and finding the intersection between those needs and their own axis, as I explained before. I believe IHI members have the potential needed to be able to do that.”

### Relationship between sustainability and artistic thinking

From the perspective of social needs, we cannot ignore the fact a society that is decarbonized and recycling-oriented must be achieved. We asked Nomura about what he thinks about this as an artist.

“It is important for me to recognize that an artist like me is a producer of ‘industrial waste.’ As for sustainability, I once saw a documentary on nomadic people in West Asia when I was doing research on tents. I was impressed by the simpleness, humility and creativity of their lives. But what shocked me was that the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that I may generate in just one day is probably several hundred times what they generate in one day. We must do something because our lifestyles are indirectly threatening theirs. The nomads cherish all things and make all kinds of efforts to make everything sustainable. In addition, there is beauty

in their lives. The decorations on their hand-made tents and their traditional clothing are bright and gorgeous. This made a strong impression on me, but I have yet to incorporate this into my own artwork.

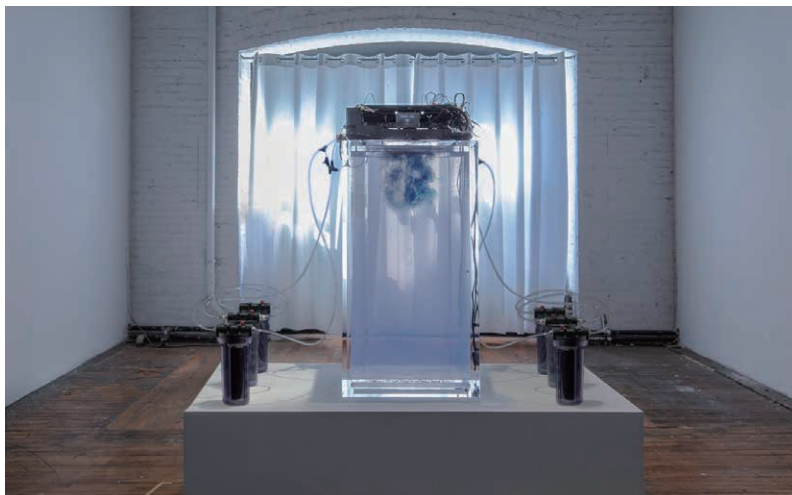
I think a sustainable, beautiful world can be realized if we make full use of the technologies and capabilities of modern society and regain a little humility. Although climate problems are a problem shared by all of humankind, we must take action voluntarily, not based on an order given by someone else. Creativity and aesthetics are absolutely necessary for us to be able to select a sustainable lifestyle while believing in our own individuality and sensibilities. I think there is a chance for artistic thinking to shine in this situation.”

### Creation going beyond convenience and affluence

The IHI Group manufactures a variety of things. Being a contemporary artist, Nomura also creates artworks, which are visible, physical things. We asked him what IHI's products and his artworks do and don't have in common. He answered, “When we close our eyes, the world disappears from view, doesn't it? Recently, I have wanted to produce something that makes us still believe in the world even when our eyes are closed.”

“Echoes,” an exhibition which he produced in collaboration with IHI, is the embodiment of this idea. It prints a photo of a deceased person, which can be said to

## Echoes



A photo of a deceased person is printed on the surface of water with an inkjet printer. The ink is dropped onto and immediately sinks into the water, which fills a tank as large as a person, slowly wavers, mixes with the water, and finally vanishes. With the device visualizing both the existence and the vanishing of a person, this artwork asks questions of what is left after a person ceases to exist as matter and what the ultimate form of someone's existence might be.

For this exhibition, IHI provided technologies for the printer head and for the applying of the coating onto the surface of the water, as well as fluid technology that allowed the ink to flow and diffuse in a beautiful manner.

be an identifiable trace left behind of him or her, on the surface of water. The printed photo wavers in the water and finally vanishes. Nomura said, “This signifies a release from the photo, while providing evidence that the person had been alive.”

“I think things that prove that existence continues even after I close my eyes or die are ‘something that is like existence itself.’ And I want to represent this in my artworks.”

A thing that solidly exists remains in a person’s memories in some way even if it is not recognized by him or her. Even when an individual ceases to exist, such a thing itself projects the existence of that individual and has some kind of influence on other things’ existences.

We wonder if IHI’s products, such as bridges and turbochargers, are the same as such things that project people’s existence and affect other things or not. Bridges allow us to safely cross valleys or rivers without having to take a roundabout route, thereby reducing the time it takes for us to cross to the other side. Turbochargers make automobiles more convenient by facilitating efficient acceleration. In Nomura’s view, however, as things made by human beings in this ever-changing world, products that are only “convenient” or that “contribute to social affluence” will be not enough in the future.

“Through my four-year relationship with IHI, I have realized that my collaboration with its members will enable us to produce something that can change the world. To do so, something that goes beyond mere convenience and efficiency is essential. In the case of a bridge, it should be memorable. For example, just looking at or crossing a bridge may stir our emotions. But when constructing a bridge leads to people saving time by crossing the bridge, what do such people do with the time they saved? ‘Things’ are just media but what I want to send is a message. I hope that your products become media to express what your world is. As for ‘contributing to people’s affluence,’ nobody knows what kind of ‘affluence’ this is referring to. So, I expect IHI members to say in a specific manner what kind of future world they are heading into.”

### **Pursued ideas from one’s personal experience spontaneously become public**

When we asked Nomura about the meaning and appeal of his art activities in IHI, he answered he has been communicating on a personal level with IHI members.

“Each participant has a great deal of curiosity. Many of them ask me questions over e-mail after lectures to understand my message and try to communicate with me in an enthusiastic manner. Although I am collaborating with the company, I am able in practical terms to have one-to-one dialogs with its employees. Those moments when we reach a mutual understanding during these dialogs delight me. What the IHI members have done and pursued so far can never be said to be wrong. Please start thinking



of your own volition and keep on doing it. Continuing to create an artwork with the belief that I will complete something that is original and that has never been created before leads me to a moment in which the artwork starts going out of my control, in a good way. In other words, I have a sense that the artwork leaves my possession and becomes public, and this is the moment that it is complete. What I can say as an artist is that even ideas that you have given up on will flourish someday in a different form when you observe the world precisely to increase the ‘density’ of your inner self while switching between subjective and objective perspectives. It is important to trust yourself and the other person or company, and to learn about both sides even more deeply once again. When that happens someday, I believe that I will surely share the delight of creation with all of you.”