

The Museum of **Everything**
Exhibition #4

Conversation with **Hiroshi Imanaka**

Hiroshi Imanaka

b 1963 (Kyoto, Japan)

Originally trained as an architect and designer, Hiroshi Imanaka is the founder and director of Atelier Incurve, Japan's most progressive studio for artists with developmental disabilities. Exhibitions include the Phyllis Kind Gallery, New York (2008) and the Suntory Museum, Tempoan (2008). Incurve artists in Exhibition #4 include Katsuhiko Terao and Tomoyuki Shinki.

[START]

MoE: **Hiroshi**, can you tell me a bit about the background of the studio, why you started it and what your goals are?

HI: Many years ago I was in **France** and visited the *Le Palais Idéal du Facteur Cheval*. It's an incredible building created by a postman who had no background in architecture or design.

I am a trained architect, so this idea fascinated and inspired me. At the time I was working for a company as an in-house designer. I started to encounter artwork by people with developmental disabilities and thought it would be interesting to invite one or two staff members with disabilities to my home to draw outside working hours.

These workshops became very popular. My guests started to invite their friends and before long we couldn't all fit in my room. I realised that if we were going to continue, we were going to need to find a bigger space. So I decided to create my own building – hence **Atelier Incurve**.

MoE: So was it a private project or was it state funded?

HI: To make **Incurve** a reality, I couldn't pay for staff, art materials and exhibitions from my own wages. So I formalised the project and contacted the government.

MoE: It seems to me that **Japan** is progressive as a society and that there is a context which allows an idea like this to emerge. There are other workshops in **Japan** and there also seems to be a culture of respect for people with disabilities.

HI: Yes, but there are very few places like **Incurve** in **Japan**. It is a social welfare corporation, but it is also unique. People in **Japan** generally do not view work created by artists with disabilities as art. Most view it with a measure of disdain. **Incurve**'s stance has always been that we see this work as art - not as outsider art, disabled art or therapy.

MoE: Did you always see it this way?

HI: Always. When we took the work to **America**, the **Phyllis Kind Gallery** presented it at the **Outsider Art Fair** in **New York** - and that terminology made me very uncomfortable.

Categorising things is too easy and usually means you're looking at work from a biased point of view. The terms outsider art and art brut are applied incessantly by the viewers, but never by the artists themselves. I'm absolutely against it. These works weren't created as art brut, it is other people who call it art brut. It is an abuse of terminology – that's why we at **Incurve** simply call it art.

MoE: Art is generally defined as intentional, meaning that an artist decides he's going to make a piece of art, calls it a piece of art and states that he is an artist. I would imagine that at least half of the artists at **Incurve** don't perceive of themselves in this way. What are your thoughts on this?

HI: I am an architect and a designer. Design is intentional. Art is different, it is always unintentional.

The artists at **Incurve** do what they do without intention or inhibition. Art – or things labeled as works of art – are very close to natural phenomena: to eating, sleeping, urinating. Art is a physiological phenomenon, not an intentional one.

MoE: So you created **Incurve**, or you had the dream for **Incurve**. Can you explain how you went from the idea to the creation?

HI: The process took three to four years. I went to the government to talk to them about my idea. At that point there had never been this version of an art studio. Normally, artists with disabilities did art on the side, whilst doing light work like baking bread or cleaning. We wanted to create a studio that was open 365 days a year. We had a conversation with the government about funding and we designed the space.

MoE: When did **Incurve** open its doors? When did it actually start functioning as an art studio?

HI: April 2003.

MoE: In terms of the work you did, how did you put together the group of artists? What was your process? Was it open to everybody or was it by a selection?

HI: When we opened, there were 14 people. From those 14, ten were people who originally came to my place to draw. These ten invited their artist friends, most of whom had been at the same school. We were the first studio

to make art all year long, so we were covered by a great deal of television and newspapers. Artists contacted us and our numbers grew.

MoE: Does **Incurve** work on a more selective process now? Or can anyone come and join in?

HI: We have a fixed number of residential artists - 27 in total. Currently no more artists can fit and residents can stay until they're 65. If any of them want to leave early they can do so and only then would we choose someone else to join.

MoE: Is that a government requirement or is that something you decided?

HI: The 65 year rule is a government mandate. **Incurve** is one of the smallest workshops in the country. I planned it this way because I knew that the more people we had, the less we would be able to know all the work which was being created.

Having a small workshop means people create high quality work. This is often not the case in a large group of people. The problem is that it's difficult for new people to join. The way to solve this would be to create two or three more places just like **Incurve**. Naturally you would need a budget to do this, and you would also need staff. The staff at **Incurve** are very special - and they're not easy to find.

MoE: Like you, I'm interested both in the process and the result. I believe that the two are equal partners. If **Tomoyuki Shinki** makes a great piece of art, it is **Shinki** and **Incurve**: a 50/50 partnership. For me the best work, comes from these 50/50 situations, run by an artist, for an artist. What is your view and how do you apply that within the atelier?

HI: **Tomoyuki Shinki** was one of the people who originally came to my house. He was 17 back then, today he's 29. **Shinki** has a developmental disability. When he first turned up he would draw small pictures of animals, but he didn't really connect.

He was watching a lot of pro-wrestling and loved sports like boxing and kickboxing. After a few years he started drawing the fighters. We offered him a large space and a better working environment. This was **Atelier Incurve**'s 50 percent. **Shinki**'s ability, of course, accounts for his 50 percent!

MoE: How did he come to use digital processes to draw the wrestlers? And then what about the enormous drawings, the ones that are 3 or 4 metres long?

HI: I had a Mac at my house. **Shinki** began playing around with it, although he didn't really understand how to use it. He didn't read the manual, he just began drawing pictures.

The problem was that the colours on-screen were not nearly as beautiful once they were printed. As he couldn't take the Mac home with him, he started drawing pictures at home.

MoE: Why not start with A4 or A3? Why start with something the size of a wall?

HI: At first, just like **Terao**, he drew small pictures with colouring pencils. Gradually, his pictures got bigger. **Terao** and **Shinki** share a space and **Terao** specialized in drawing large pictures. Even though their styles are completely different, **Shinki** might have been influenced by this.

MoE: That brings up an interesting point. Does the communal aspect of the workshop play an important role?

HI: **Incurve** isn't very big. You'll have 4 or 5 people sharing a room. At the same time, our artists rarely influence one another. **Terao**, **Shinki** and **Uchino** are currently all in the same room, but each one does his own thing.

What is important for us is that all our artists have a place to meet and have meals together. People with disabilities are no longer hidden away like art brut artists in asylums. They are modern people: everyone has a mobile phone, no one is isolated. I hope this atelier helps them achieve all this.

MoE: If you give an artist time, space, and a supportive atmosphere, they make something. How do you at **Incurve** create that environment - and what if they don't want to create?

HI: We do not judge and we offer absolutely no guidance or tutoring. At other Japanese institutions staff often instruct the artists. If you do that, artists end up drawing the same thing as you: their pictures resemble the teachers' pictures. We do not do this at **Atelier Incurve**.

If somebody decides that they don't want to create - and there are people like that here - we never force them. There are some who draw constantly,

some who have a burst for five minutes, then go off for lunch, some who draw for one minute a day and others who do absolutely nothing depending on the season. We don't think of any of this as bad. At **Incurve** they're free to do whatever they like.

MoE: Do you have reference material at the studio? And what about your use of unusual and oversized materials?

HI: We have many books and people use them according to their interests, be it vehicles, animals or buildings. We have 3 types of artist: those who look at books for images; those who imagine everything inside their own heads; and those who go outside, sketch and come back.

Katsuhiko Terao is 51 years old. He has a mental disability and also lost his left eye to cancer. Today he comes to the studio every day except Sunday. At first it was just at my house. His pictures were small, 15cm. They gradually got bigger - and today the biggest ones are 4x6 metres.

MoE: How did that happen? How did it go from a 15cm piece of paper to a giant black cloth as big as a room?

HI: **Terao** draws architectural designs and blueprints. When he was a child, **Terao's** family owned a construction company, **Terao Industry**. His father was the president and he it seems to have been a very happy time for him. All of **Terao's** works seem to relate to this period. His family was very peaceful and he truly loved his mother. Now his parents have passed away and he lives with his older sister.

MoE: The work he makes, are they plans for buildings or cities?

HI: Buildings and large architectural iron structures. **Terao** worked as a welder at his father's company. I don't think he believes they'll ever be built. He does have a piece of welding machinery from when he was a welder and has made one piece of art using it.

MoE: What is the artists' relationship with the presentation of work? Is there a gallery at **Incurve** for the public?

HI: Most of the artists here show little interest when their work is being exhibited. What they really enjoy is creating. We leave exhibitions to other galleries.

MoE: I was speaking with a curator here who felt it was important to display this artwork together with some sense of the process - that is to

say, we should display the object, being the artwork, and the process, being **Incurve**. What is your view on this?

HI: Everyone has a disability here, so it is important to talk about it. However, if you emphasise it too much the artwork will be seen in a different light. I don't think there's a problem divulging basic information, but if you say too much, it turns into art brut or outsider art. When I give talks, I speak of disabilities but don't divulge everything.

MoE: When you sell a piece of work, how is the money split?

HI: Under the standard Japanese system, if **Terao's** work is sold, the profits are split amongst the residents. At **Incurve**, if **Terao** makes a work, it becomes his possession. If his work sells for 1,000,000 yen it is given to him less administrative costs. The longer the work takes, the more costs it incurs.

MoE: One of the aims of **Exhibition #4** is to encourage people to create workshops like yours. What is your advice for the person who perhaps has a son with a disability, or knows a few people like him - how do they begin, what do they do?

HI: Many parents have children with disabilities and come to **Incurve** for advice. I tell them to do as we do at **Incurve**. Do not educate them, do not teach them how to draw or mix colours. Give them a reasonable space - although we understand this can be difficult at home - and good drawing materials. If they do this and avoid watching too much TV, it's enough.

MoE: In terms of practical advice, what kind of space, what kind of materials?

HI: Japanese homes are small. If you draw on a desk, the pictures will be small. If you draw small pictures, you may be unable to draw large pictures. So set up a canvas or easel instead, make pens, pencils, felt tips and paint available, don't tell them to draw, let them do it for themselves.

MoE: How do you gauge what someone wants? For example, with artists who are non-verbal, how do you find out what they want?

HI: There are many people who can't speak. There are some who take up a sort of rhythm with their bodies, who tap on their desks, who express themselves in these ways. When they draw, they express themselves. Even without words, we understand.

MoE: How does that evolve? How are you able to read that body language? Imagine I have no professional training, how do I learn to do that?

HI: You do not need knowledge. Be like a mother. Even if her child can't speak, she can understand what her child needs. If you rush, you won't understand. It's not something that you can understand in a year. It takes five, ten years. You're humans interacting, even if you can't speak, even if you don't understand what they say. For example **James**, if you and I lived together, you'd start to understand my **Osaka** dialect, and I would begin to understand your English.

MoE: It might take you 10 years, it would take me at least 50! You're a more evolved thinker! And with that I will say goodbye and take some of that evolved thinking and communicate it to the world.

HI: Thank you very much.

[END]

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