

# The Actor's Studio

CAROLINE BUSTA ON EI ARAKAWA

TO GET A SENSE of Ei Arakawa's *BYOF—Bring Your Own Flowers*, a collaboration with painter Amy Sillman that took place last November at New York's Japan Society, as part of Performa 07, one would do well to look back to Peter Handke's 1966 play *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (Offending the Audience). As the curtain rises, four actors appear onstage and announce that there will be no production. They explain that they are not acting, noting that those seated are doing an excellent job performing the role of the audience. By the time this information is delivered, it's less a shock than a confirmation: The seating of the audience, preparation of the actors, and placement of the set constituted the first half of the performance. Handke reverses the theatrical gaze—or at least renders it indeterminate—by encouraging the actors to be consumers and the audience members to be producers. This simultaneous broadcast of contexts, public and private, onstage and off, similarly arises in the work of Ei Arakawa, as was the case in *BYOF*.

Following the title's directive, many audience members arrived with bouquets in hand, filling the lobby where the performance was billed as taking place. As the flowers were collected, a wave of small conversations rippled through the room; soon the crowd grew to understand that the performance had, in fact, already begun. In the announcement for the event, Arakawa described the evening as "a celebration of architecture and the traditional Japanese art of ikebana" that would include "live performance of painting-actions (not action-painting). Lives of paintings in and out. True paintings will dance and move in many ways." The language recalls that of the postwar Japanese experimental art group Gutai, which took to heart Harold Rosenberg's description of the canvas as "an arena in which to act": Gutai members plunged through paper screens, rolled bare-chested in mud, and employed a stockpile of tools as disparate as toy cars, a watering can, a cannon, and their own feet. The work of art thus migrated from the material object to the action by which it is formed—"painting-actions" instead of "action-painting"—as Gutai took early steps toward a dematerialized art practice years before Allan Kaprow's Happenings and Fluxus's events.

Arakawa's performance, however, began in a sense with two paintings—works by Sillman (who had been the younger artist's teacher at Bard) that served as the



Ei Arakawa and Amy Sillman, *BYOF—Bring Your Own Flowers*, 2007. Performance view, Japan Society, New York, November 7, 2007. Photo: Andrea Christens.

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subjects around which Arakawa scored the performance's actions. Sillman's paintings became actors, and her position as painter became subject matter; the artist herself, meanwhile, watched from the audience. Joining in the staging of *BYOF* were eleven additional "performers"—Richard Aldrich, Alisha Kerlin, Daniel Lepkoff, Charles Mayton, Patrick Palermo, Patrick Price, Woody Sullender, Sakura Shimada, Jean-Marc Superville Sovak, Sergei Tcherepnin, and Patricia Treib. While each was given explicit tasks to carry out, the loose nature of the score generated a flow of varied and overlapping activity. The performers commenced by building structures of cheap wood, to which they affixed surfaces of photocopied paper and Styrofoam; these were "painted" with the audience's flowers, leaving a layer of exhausted vegetal material to accumulate on and throughout the haphazard "set." Arakawa next presented a slide lecture on the careers of modernism's alcoholic artists and critics. At the lobby entrance, a few performers and viewers stepped outside to smoke, placing them in a prime position to watch as two paintings were carried supine through the entranceway ("Like corpses!" remarked one audience member, herself a painter). Sillman's paintings were then paraded

and ceremoniously "presented" before being secured upright to the just-built structure. Music was played, beer was sold and consumed, curtains were sewn and hung, and a vacuum cleaner ran. Two performers assumed the roles of Sillman and *Brooklyn Rail* editor Phong Bui, staging an interview published in that paper; another collaborator read from *Offending the Audience*. Arakawa later auctioned off cereal boxes suited with photocopies of Sillman's paintings. With cell phones, cameras, and video recorders, audience and performers alike documented the event, an action that served to blur further the "division of labor." The paper screens were then destroyed, the curtains shredded, and the structures deinstalled; unwitting audience members were handed trash bags and asked to help clean up. Indeed, the event presented the full palette of artmaking, from setup and procrastination to creation and consumption—collapsed into the performative and divided within a space fractured and laced with projections.

All of Arakawa's works to date have had an architectural component, but the physical structures are secondary to the collective participation they require; "architecture" is never pursued as a permanent desti-



From left: Ei Arakawa and Amy Sillman, *BYOF—Bring Your Own Flowers*, 2007. Performance view, Japan Society, New York, November 7, 2007. Photo: Paula Court. Re-creation of Allan Kaprow's 1959 *Happening 18 Happenings in 6 Parts*. Performance view, Deitch Studios, New York, 2007. Photo: Lucas Ihlein.

nation. (As artist Jiro Yoshihara stated in the 1956 *Gutaï* manifesto, "We tried to combine human creative ability with the characteristics of the material in order to concretize the abstract space.") In Arakawa's *Toward a Standard Risk Architecture*, 2006, the artist and friends renovated Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York—in the middle of a group exhibition—for four days during business hours. Not only did the renovation ultimately obscure visual access from the street, but as the gallery was to move to another location after the show closed, Arakawa's actions were hardly driven by the desire for architectural "improvement" in the usual sense. Likewise, in his contribution to "Grand Openings" (2005), curated by Jay Sanders at Anthology Film Archives in New York for Performa 05, Arakawa collaboratively built a large structure out of silver fiberglass insulation material, only to destroy it, revealing pictures that had been hidden within.

In this way, Arakawa's work seems inflected by the Shinto shrines of Ise, Japan, which have been rebuilt every two decades for the past thirteen hundred years to the specifications of their original seventh-century design. Such preservation suggests the use of architecture as a common effort around which community materializes, rather than as the unyielding confines within which community is contained. The concretization of Arakawa's spaces similarly fluctuates between progress and regress. In fact, if architecture does serve a material role in Arakawa's performances, it is not to house the action or to resist it but to divide it, fragmenting the ways in which the performance can be perceived—hear something but not see it, smell something but not know its source. *BYOF*'s disordered arrangement of plywood, projection screens, and paper walls, along with a nightmare of cameras, speakers, tripods, and cords, prohibited any one "painting-action" from being consumed in its sensorial totality.

But this is just one level of obstruction in Arakawa's work, as his insistence on collective action additionally

short-circuits the primary way in which value is assigned to performance-based, deskilled, or dematerialized practices. While *BYOF* included several known artists, not one was directed to make a signature work. Further, as no material goal was at stake, the performers were not required to engage in any productive "relational" activity—their miscommunications while "onstage" were indistinguishable from the scripted exchanges—nor were they asked to appear as the "artists" they are expected to perform for panel discussions, artist talks, and dinners. As mentioned above, Sillman, the most senior artist involved (and the only one represented by her own work), was notably relieved of performing. Arakawa's collaborations might thus best be described as irrational factories—in *BYOF*, a schizophrenic assembly line spanning the various forms of artistic production typically engaged when an object endeavors to be art.

Additionally, in his fluid use of buildings, Arakawa's performances physicalize a change in our conception of the gallery space, as reflected in the transition from Jackson Pollock's canvas-bound action painting to the subject-bound painting actions of *Gutaï*. Art historian and critic Eric de Bruyn describes this shift as central to artistic production since post-Minimalism; recalling Dan Graham's observation on a Bruce Nauman performance, de Bruyn writes, "The space does not contain the performance; rather it is the performance that constitutes the space." In *BYOF*, the actions physically moved from inside to outside and back again: from lobby to sidewalk, from preparatory to presentational, from actor to audience. Traversing various divisions of inside and outside—"lives of paintings in and out"—Arakawa effectively demonstrates the general inability of traditional, architecturally grounded institutions to limit an artist.

In this regard, it's intriguing to consider *BYOF*'s having taken place under the auspices of Performa, a young performing arts biennial in New York with no

"home" other than a website and logo. The organization is undoubtedly helpful in providing visibility and financial resources to the performing arts—and to relatively unknown artists such as Arakawa—yet it seems fair to ask whether the works subject to Performa's imprimatur are not also at risk of a new kind of institutionalization that would seem to run counter to the ephemerality, immediacy, and specificity associated historically with performance. (Put another way, Performa asks that one consider the potential effects of an institution premised on those very qualities.) According to its website, the biennial seeks to "provide audiences with a highly selective overview of the most outstanding work." However, like a "best of" record, as Performa filters these immaterial goods for its consuming audience, the performances are separated from the communities out of which they developed and reformatted through tasteful promotional material. Far from the dynamic shifting of roles and collaborative constitution of meaning explored in Handke's *Offending the Audience*, Performa generates an audience whose members, whether on a rooftop or in the street, are always, in a sense, entertained from the comfort of their seats.

In a Performa 07 panel discussion on Allan Kaprow held at the Jewish Museum a few days after *BYOF*, the biennial's founder and director, RoseLee Goldberg, heralded Kaprow as her organization's "patron saint"; indeed, "remade" Happenings were among the events featured in last year's biennial. But in Kaprow's day, performances like his presented a departure from the object-bound, market-ready art of earlier generations. These artists held little regard for crowd-pleasing entertainment value or quality—there was no audience. Rather, in these events, a close-knit community sought to test the limits of ideas central to its discourse; resistant to fixed definitions, the performances, as it were, just *happened*.

The crowd at *BYOF* included artists, friends, teachers, and students. Packed into the Japan Society lobby, they overwhelmed the kiosk selling Performa souvenirs, suggesting that Arakawa's collaborative creations and deconstructions continue to create a space for artistic community. Through his confusion of consumers and producers, subjects and objects, insides and outsides, binaries are blurred and indeterminacy prevails. Yet it just may be the concrete force of a social "inside" that gives Arakawa's work its vitality. □

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