



# Out of Body

CATHERINE WOOD ON THE ART OF EI ARAKAWA

**FOR NEARLY A DECADE, EI ARAKAWA** has staged performances with startling brio, his makeshift sets, friendly throngs, and off-hand gestures signaling a type of eccentric event that won't be limited by art's normal viewing structures. But the New York-based artist does not only act, he reenacts. Key to his works is an attention to the constructed, given, and preconceived—the repetition of history, the commodification of experience, the false intimacy of networks. He thus continually revisits the experimental art that has come before him, not least that of the postwar avant-gardes within and beyond Japan: Gutai, Jikken Kōbō, Hi-Red Center, and Fluxus, to name a few.

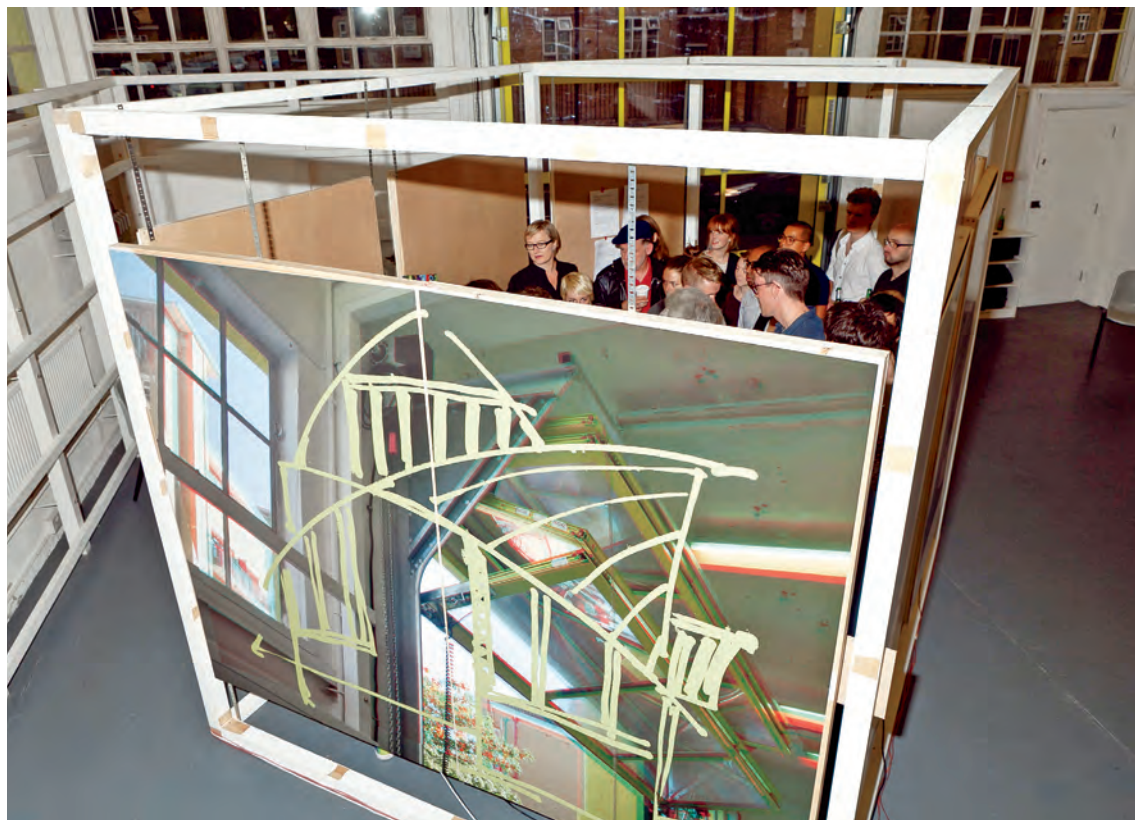
*Artforum* invited curator **CATHERINE WOOD** to explore Arakawa's performances and his palpable engagement with this history—a fitting beginning to a suite of essays penned on the occasion of the major New York exhibitions "Tokyo 1955–1970," at the Museum of Modern Art, and "Gutai: Splendid Playground," at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. In the pages that follow, a number of distinguished contributors examine the work of lesser-known yet seminal participants in the art of postwar Japan—a vital field marked by violence, guilt, and repression in the wake of the world war, by the technological and capitalist visions of the 1960s and '70s, and by a burgeoning globalism that is undeniably formative of our own moment.



Ei Arakawa, *See Weeds*, 2011.  
Performance view, Les Abattoirs,  
Musée d'art moderne et  
contemporain à Toulouse, France,  
October 13, 2011. From  
*Le Printemps de Septembre*.  
Photo: Marc Boyer.



Above, left: Ei Arakawa and Amy Sillman, *BYOF (Bring Your Own Flowers)*, 2007. Performance view, Japan Society, New York, November 2, 2007. From *Performa 07*. Photo: Paula Court.



Above, right: Ei Arakawa, Gela Patashuri, and Sergei Tcherepnin, *Be a Speaker. So Be It . . .*, 2011. Performance view, The Showroom, London, September 3, 2011. Photo: Daniel Brooke.

## The artist, Arakawa knows, can no longer simply be present.

**MORE THAN AN ARTIST**, Ei Arakawa performs as *compere*: He plays the host, the master of ceremonies, the showman who is center stage yet not the star. Indeed, if Arakawa's chosen genre is performance, he nevertheless keeps his own presence in check, deflecting attention away from himself as the sole focus of activity. He gives himself over to collaborations with other artists, curators, audiences, even art historians; he acts as a catalyst, prompting events to arise around him through his coordination of props and participants. Many have described these situations as convivial gatherings, intimate affairs that descend from the immediacy and provisional structure of Happenings. But they are more than that. Increasingly, Arakawa's works range from the jury-rigged and impromptu to the grand and museal, and he has underscored the artificiality of any such arrangement, addressing the frame of spectacle or entertainment or style within which these performances occur, and his control or lack thereof over the entire experience. He simultaneously directs and submits to the unfolding of action; serious intent betrays a Pop-inflected sense of showbiz. Often dressed in outré garb—perhaps a brightly colored Hawaiian shirt or a pink towel on his head—he also regularly sports a microphone headset, à la Britney Spears.

Though I am describing the work Arakawa makes as performance, what he does has little in common

with the now-classic genre of performance art associated with 1960s and '70s body art practices. If that primary alphabet of live experiment—established by artists including Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, Gina Pane, and Carolee Schneemann—was concerned to a large extent with the revelation of interiority via authentic means of expression (whether nudity, self-inflicted pain, or other acts that conveyed a sense of the body's fallibility or vulnerability), Arakawa proposes a different conception of the subject and of performance. His work manifests a subject that challenges the Freudian model of the individual inner self on which the performances of Abramović and Pane were founded (and which they sought so violently to expose). The artist, Arakawa knows, can no longer simply be present. Instead, his collaborative situations might be linked more fruitfully, both in form and in strategy, to another strain of postwar performance—one that contested the notion of a core individual interiority in favor of the dispersed agency of the *group*. It's not surprising that Arakawa cites as crucial references the onstage events of the Gutai group and the parallel cross-disciplinary collaborations of Jikken Kōbō (Experimental Workshop) in the mid-'50s, along with Happenings, Judson dance, and the Fluxus event score. Further afield, one could even connect Arakawa's work to the mass choreographic actions of Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica in the '60s

or to the sensory investigation of materials by group participants in works by Antoni Muntadas in the '70s. All of these endeavors dared to defy the primacy of individual subjectivity by staging intersubjective gestures or temporary communities.

For Arakawa, then, any authentic claim to a unified interior self seems impossible now, a humanist belief consigned to history. But the body persists; it's still stubbornly there, if surrounded by and connected to, even merging with, other bodies, things, and flows. Arakawa appears to be enacting a model of the self that cannot stand alone, one irrevocably tied to new forms of collectivity. And this multiplicity includes not only human subjects but inanimate objects: sculptures, paintings, found materials, architectural infrastructure, data, perfume bottles, ceiling fans, frequent-flyer miles. The artist has said he approaches the conception of the subject "from the outside," starting from the space surrounding the body rather than the other way around. Yet that space is never neutral; it is suffused, or contaminated, with projection and fantasy. He says he sees his work as building "a kind of architecture of subjectivity that is externalized but also has a fictional capacity."<sup>1</sup>

To this end, Arakawa's actions always involve a layering of physical and conceptual supports that frame the network of human and object relationships within. Many performances—such as *BYOF (Bring Your Own Flowers)* with the painter Amy Sillman, for Performa in 2007; *pOEtry pArk* with artist and writer Karl Holmqvist, at the Frieze Art Fair in 2010; and Arakawa's collaboration at the Showroom in London in 2011 with artists Sergei Tcherenpina and Gela Patashuri—incorporate a temporary architectural structure, perhaps made of scaffolding or plywood, built by the participants and used as a support for paintings, sculptures, or text signage. Or the artist may construct mobile, modular structures on which to wheel other objects; sometimes, performers themselves become the primary supports. For instance, *I am an employee of UNITED Vol. 2*, at Los Angeles gallery Overduin and Kite in the fall of 2012, involved the manipulation of long elastic bands attached to three mannequins propped up on chairs. The bands stretched to small paintings (by Nikolas Gambaroff) held by Arakawa and his fellow performers, who ran back and forth across the space, pulling these lines into taut diagonals, creating a literal web of connections between the work's elements and the gallery space. In an adjacent room, mannequins had been strapped to whirring ceiling fans overhead. These effigies encapsulated perfectly the body in thrall to social and architectural infrastructure, plugged into the machine.

**NOTHING LESS** than the Super Bowl serves as inspiration for Arakawa, its juggernaut halftime show's

Right: Ei Arakawa, *International Class (A Figure Flying C)*, 2012, fabric, shoes, synthetic filling, ceiling fan. Installation view, Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest.

Below: Ei Arakawa, *I am an employee of UNITED Vol. 2*, 2012. Performance view, Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles, September 16, 2012. Photo: Kelly Akashi.





Ei Arakawa, *Liaison, a Naive Pacifist* (detail), 2009, inkjet prints on paper. Installation view, Taka Ishii Gallery, Kyoto. Photo: Naoko Tamura.

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hastily constructed sets echoed in the artist's provisional setups. He may put together and dismantle an entire structure or show in as little as thirty minutes, or erect installations only to break them down and display their documentation (as in *Liaison, a Naive Pacifist*, 2009). This just-in-time production results in incongruous combinations of impressive settings, even more impressive artworks as props, and diminutive or improvised actions. For example, in *See Weeds*, 2011, at Les Abattoirs during the Printemps de Septembre festival in Toulouse, France, he was (miraculously) allowed to bring six historic Gutai paintings by Atsuko Tanaka, Kazuo Shiraga, and others from the collection into a large space and move them around on travel frames adapted with wheels. A vast backdrop designed by Picasso and Luis Fernandez in 1936 (also from the collection) loomed behind, while two paintings by Josh Smith, serving as theater curtains, flanked the space. Arakawa and his collaborators variously huddled behind individual paintings, shuffling along with their feet in synchrony to music,

or pushed the entire group of paintings into a large and slowly rotating circular formation, as though they were a small flotilla of boats sailing on a lake. ("Some paintings we are not allowed to move very fast," Arakawa confided to the audience, as the Tanaka was wheeled along at the appropriately painstaking—and conservator-approved—speed.) Silke Otto-Knapp's paintings were similarly paraded through Regent's Park in London by the artist and others, appearing against the verdant foliage like ceremonial banners, before the dance images they depicted were used as prompts for a series of gymnastic poses. That painted pictures are so often embedded, with special status, within the constellation of performers, structures, and relationships that Arakawa sets up lends the action the sense of some mysterious aesthetic order. Perhaps this is why Arakawa's community of participants sometimes seem as if they are playing out the legacies of action painting—from the hyperbolically gestural process painting of Gutai to the choreography diagrammed in Otto-Knapp's pieces. The performances



convert pictorial tableaux into actual movement, prior trace into an endless *mise en abyme* of reconfigured postures and steps.

Where such events transpire is just as important as how they do. The movements, artworks, and props all rely on their setting in conventional or given places (with the attendant expectations of behavior and experience): the museum lobby, the conference space, the park, the bar, the gallery, or the studio. Arakawa effects hybrid scenarios that merge cultural forms and reinvent their atmosphere. He has appropriated the nightclub format of singles' night within the museum atrium (at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Tate Modern's Tanks in London), performances and talks within a bar (inspired by New York's Stonewall), a ritualized procession within the "free" outdoor (but nevertheless highly formal, royal) space of the park. These are sites on the cusp between high culture and abject pickup scenes, charged political history and shopping-mall ennui, and Arakawa both captures and invigorates their desultory air.

Above: Ei Arakawa and Karl Holmqvist, *pOEtry pArk*, 2010. Performance view, Frieze Projects, Regent's Park, London, November 13, 2010. Second and third from left: Ei Arakawa and Karl Holmqvist. Photo: Polly Braden.

Right: Ei Arakawa and Mari Mukai, *homelessness: YUMING CITIES*, 2008. Performance view, Shinko Pier, Yokohama, September 15, 2008. From the Yokohama Triennale. Photo: Keizo Kioku.





Above: *Grand Openings, Single's Night, 2011*. Performance view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 29, 2011. From "Grand Openings Return of the Blogs." Photo: Dan Poston.

Below: Ei Arakawa and Jutta Koether, *Single's Night with Jutta Koether's Mad Garland, 2012*. Performance view, The Tanks, Tate Modern, London, July 29, 2012.



Just as Arakawa directs our attention to such shifts in ambience, he often makes a specific nod to his own history. The artist grew up in Fukushima, Japan; moved to New York when he was twenty; initially worked checking coats; and then got a job "warming up the dance floor," as he puts it, at the Web, a gay Asian dance club and cabaret. He attended the School of Visual Arts, Bard College, and the Whitney Independent Study Program, all the while pursuing projects that, he says, enabled him to hold on to his US artist's visa. His work continually negotiates his split sense of belonging between America and Japan. Witness his roving pop-up Green Tea Gallery, begun in 2011 with his brother, Tomoo. Staging shows that often last only a day, the gallery has been located variously at his mother's workplace in Fukushima (a place very much in the world news at the time due to the disaster there), in his friend's studio in Brooklyn, and back in his cousin's home in Kanagawa.

This oscillation between artistic and familial realities extends to Arakawa's art history, too—to the nascent globalism of the postwar neo-avant-gardes, which are everywhere revived and reinterpreted in his work. If the precious Gutai paintings he scored for the Toulouse performance were remarkably activated as props, he trumped even this feat by restaging Shiraga's *Challenging Mud, 1955*, in collaboration with art historian Reiko Tomii at MOMA in 2011. This legendary piece, in which Shiraga "painted" by writhing within a massive amount of mud, was here acted out as an art-historical celebrity wrestling match, with Arakawa hovering on the sides, occasionally holding a microphone to Tomii's mouth to make audible her running commentary.

Arakawa's engagements with these movements differ from many attempts at historical reenactment by contemporary artists because he seeks less to animate lost archival moments than to appropriate them in fragments, incorporating them into his own project of articulating fleeting subjectivities "from the outside." If the artists of Gutai and Jikken Kōbō, for example, had already contested authorial singularity and compositional gesture in favor of the collective, the base, and the contingent, Arakawa wryly repeats their actions, amplifying them while unmooring them from the specific histories they represent. Indeed, much as these citations may appear to expose Arakawa's personal influences or taste, they are more like postcards on a teenager's bedroom wall, performing a construction of identity that is continually malleable and not necessarily truthful. They echo the ways in which personal histories might be shared or swapped today, with the private or repressed self laid bare as a blithely confessional superficiality that somehow evades real exposure, or perhaps suggests



**Arakawa's mannequins encapsulate perfectly the body in thrall to social and architectural infrastructure, plugged into the machine.**

Above: Grand Openings and Reiko Tomii, "Challenging Mud" as Archive, 2011. Performance views, Museum of Modern Art, New York, July 23, 2011. Reiko Tomii and Ei Arakawa. From "Grand Openings Return of the Blogs." Photos: Ming Tiampo.

Below: Ei Arakawa with Harumi Nishizawa and Miwako Tezuka, Joy of Life: Performance-Talk: The Relationship Between Visual Art and Performing Art in Modern Japan, 2012. Performance view, The Tanks, Tate Modern, London, July 26, 2012. From "Art in Action."

there is no real inmost self to expose—the online profile substituted for angst-ridden interiority.

Take Arakawa's seminar within the Tate Tanks' "Art in Action" festival this past summer. The artist invited art historians Harumi Nishizawa and Miwako Tezuka to participate, using passages from their research into postwar Japanese art as a "score" for a live performance-conversation. Historical documents thus became a set of templates and patterns that could be actively used. Arakawa assembled a group of gallerists, curators, and artists (including a number of insiders, all connected by an interest in Jikken Kōbō) to join Nishizawa, Tezuka, and himself onstage. Nearly everyone (male and female alike) donned a black wig with bangs and a white brocade shirt resembling a Russian peasant costume, inspired by the 1920s Japanese art group Mavo, a radical contemporary of Dada. We (this writer included!) remained present onstage as a "chorus" for the lectures and discussions. Occasionally, we were invited to reenact the gestures of historical Mavo performances depicted in a series of photographs projected behind us; sometimes we asked questions and got into discursive asides, serving as a ready-made community





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around the stories and periods under discussion. But given the fancy dress, it was also a bit like performing as a cheering campaign for the esoteric research area being explored onstage. It was a party of sorts, yet one that included the gathered audience, because Arakawa’s commentary and finely judged sense of playfulness appealed to them directly. The artist, in other words, continually twisted the group event into an extraordinary reflection on reenactment—posing performance as a reiteration of existing histories and the experiences of others that we necessarily inhabit, even if we are not confined to them.

In keeping with his penchant for ceding agency to the group, Arakawa usually does not make art objects himself. But he works with many artist peers and friends who do, including Gambaroff, Otto-Knapp, Tcherepnin, Kerstin Brätsch, and Jutta Koether; he is also a member of the collective Grand Openings. He invites others to work with him partly to find points of identification with them, partly to elicit points of difference. The artist has said he often tries to imagine how a person’s artwork and presence will play out within the context of the performance and the relationships therein. This course of events is conceived prior to the actual “works” made during or as a result of the performances: The output of one of Arakawa’s sorties might take the form of a print, a painting, or a film. At the same time, the artist says that he “submits himself” to his collaborators’ own inflection of the setup, to their requirements. In each instance, figures and objects bend to outside constraints. Performers sway to language, mimicking painted letters by spelling them with their bodies; they reproduce the positions of historical artists or actors; they replicate shapes in paintings; they auction off parts of the performance’s set, entering into real circuits of exchange; mannequins contort in yoga poses, in correspondence to the quintessential contemporary self-help leisure activity.

Arakawa may play the host, then, but he also provides a “score”—a supplied physical frame, a set of

elements, and nominal instructions—and then yields to a mutual negotiation of how to play it. It is a model of cooperation and collaboration that echoes what sociologist Richard Sennett has recently described as “rehearsal.” For Sennett, the rehearsal—as a group endeavor, within an orchestra or chamber-music group, for example—is a format fundamentally different from the solitary nature of “practice”: “Common to both is the standard procedure of attending initially to a whole score, then focusing on particular testing passages,” but “rehearsing drags musical habits into shared consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> Sennett implies that in rehearsing as part of a group, one must allow one’s own interpretation of the written music to find compatibility, to chime and spark, with the interpretations of others. Arakawa’s collaborative work can be seen as a series of attempts to picture this mode of intersubjectivity—so that this tentative form of rehearsal becomes the work itself, rather than a process prior to the finished artwork. And although the artist’s attitude is one of openness, the way the work unfolds rarely feels completely out of his control. It is as though he takes the notion of the experiment—in which the unknown might erupt at any time—but “rehearses” it, so that certain outcomes are accounted for in advance, and unpredictability is more a mood than a genuine threat of disruption. Here, dialogue is understood as something that issues forth not from internal subjectivities being unleashed or expressed, but rather from positions being freely traded, in a succession of swings and balances, with one another.

*Score* is not, of course, an innocent term here. Arakawa clearly takes up the lessons of John Cage’s scores and the event score as proffered by Fluxus artists from George Brecht to Toshi Ichiyanagi. If the event score radically shifted the musical or choreographic score into the realm of everyday acts and of quotidian movements or sounds (Brecht’s particularly pithy *Word Event* of 1961 simply instructed: EXIT), it also, even more than the Happening, drained the performer of affect, used language as readymade, converted “script” and “acting” into logical and open-ended exchange. Yet Arakawa pushes this postwar innovation to its limit: His performances have all the easy, indeterminate direction and exchange of these forebears, but they always happen at a remove. To participate in or witness an Arakawa piece is to experience immediacy as framed, rehearsed—to see the neo-avant-garde encounter registered as a singles’ night, or the utopian collective occurring in a postproduction video.

Like the rehearsal and the score, the lyric is a shared enactment. One of the recurring characteristics of these performances is Arakawa’s use of repeated words or phrases as incantatory chant:

Running painting painting  
Running  
Out  
Painting

Painting is watching

or

Lives of the performers  
Performers’ lives

or

Singles’ night  
Singles  
Singles  
Singles  
Singles

or

Duty-free  
Duty-free  
Duty-free

Arakawa’s peculiar poesis recalls the sensation of having the first line of a pop song stuck on repeat inside one’s head. In his work, this inner voice is externalized to lend structure to an otherwise chaotic mass of activity: whether the thirty pairs of “singles” who improvise dance routines using Koether’s black painted planks as props in *Single’s Night with Jutta Koether’s Mad Garland*, or the performers carrying Otto-Knapp’s silver dance paintings through the park, or a performance in which Arakawa acts as On Kawara, making paintings while sitting in a plane, with the flight attendant repeating “duty-free.” The chant iterates a singularity—of voice, of a word, of an isolated idea—that is at odds with the multiplicity of what Arakawa sets forth visually and experientially. And the phrases themselves are often stock phrases, clichés that assume common knowledge, doubly underscoring both the collective and the ready-made nature of the action.

**ONE OF THE SUBTLE SURPRISES** in Arakawa’s work is the way he addresses the audience. At his recent performance with Nora Schultz at Reena Spaulings Fine Art in New York, the two artists demarcated a large performance area in the center of the gallery with clear plastic sheeting laid on the floor. The sheeting had lines drawn across it so that it resembled a notebook. Arakawa and Schultz poured large tins of black and white paint into a metal basin on one side, then mixed the paints in order to make prints with the medium. The audience members were distributed all around, although they began and ended grouped mostly on the side from which they had entered. Several times, Arakawa crossed what

might have become comfortably delineated as the fourth wall and asked people to move out of his way. The audience-body thus assumed a number of configurations as the piece progressed, and no easy view-point could be established. Whether this was wholly happenstance or partly intentional was unclear, but there is no question that his works often involve shunting the audience around, quite matter-of-factly, as though he were organizing obstructive traffic. So, too, he has spoken of his suspicion of the way in which museums want to “service” the audience, a general suspicion, perhaps—as an artist working with performance—of being the “entertainer,” as much as he appears to ham it up as exactly that. He seems to acknowledge that, nowadays, performance is very much the art world’s latest novelty, either as blockbuster show or as relational ploy, a bid for intimacy, but he doesn’t let his audience settle in to enjoy either.

Arakawa has also observed that people get used to a certain duration of performance. He recognizes, in other words, that the solicitation of duration or endurance alone does not guarantee any subversion of normal museum or artgoing experience (to the contrary, hundreds of millions of people sit, rapt, through hours of *Batman* sequels or consecutive downloads of *Sex in the City* or, for that matter, *The Clock*). In order to break the rhythm of expectation, Arakawa alternates between periods of mute, apparently solipsistic action (moving objects around, making prints, and so on), bursts of fast, extravagant showmanship, and simply chatting to people—audience members, stage managers—informally, as an aside. This direct engagement can appear to be the point at which the artist’s own subjectivity is revealed, its immediacy and candor distinct from the ritualistic repetition of singular words and phrases. These are the moments when access to some actual person, some authentic exchange, seems to surge forth—moments of some kind of real. But this is never the whole story. Rather, the artist’s voice here serves to exaggerate and enable the fiction offered by the work, proposing a passage across the threshold into its world, via the artist’s apparent exposure of his own incidental “realness.” Arakawa leads us outward into this realm of proliferating bodies, objects, frames, and atmospheres—if only to turn back inward, to the splintered, shifting pastiche of sensibilities and identities that constitute how we experience ourselves today. And all the while he is partly there, partly waiting in the wings. □

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#### NOTES

1. Ei Arakawa in conversation with the author, December 12, 2012.
2. Richard Sennett, *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures, and Politics of Cooperation* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 15.



Above: Ei Arakawa, *Smell Image B (Bow)*, 2012, wood, fabric, metal, Dior Addict by Christian Dior, Driven by Derek Jeter, Fat Electrician by État Libre d’Orange, Halle by Halle Berry, Lady Million by Paco Rabanne, 28 x 30 x 20”.

Below: Ei Arakawa and Nora Schultz, *Social Scarecrows Printing Fields*, 2012. Performance view, Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York, November 18, 2012. Photo: Jake Palmert.

