

The artist, Ei Arakawa was born in Fukushima, Japan but has been based in New York since 1998. Working almost always collaboratively to produce a diverse body of performative work, the artist is known for employing cultural tropes to erode and question and interrupt boundaries of identity and artistic endeavor.

His most recent collaboration is UNITED BROTHERS, which involves performative work presented in cooperation with his brother, Tomoo Arakawa. The collaboration has been the focus of an exhibition at Halle für Kunst Lüneberg, and most recently was presented at Frieze London 2014 as part of the fairs new initiative 'Live', that aims to present 'ambitious, active or performance-based installation'. The brothers' presentation at Frieze is entitled *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?*, and involves the duo offering Frieze visitors soup made by their mother from vegetables grown within the region of Fukushima's 2011 nuclear disaster. The Japanese Farmer's Association has certified the ingredients of the soup as safe, but the soup poses the theoretical threat that it may be radioactive.

The presentation at Frieze was made in association with the itinerant Green Tea Gallery, which Ei and his brother formed with the purpose of inviting international artists to collaborate on new projects in the Fukushima region. As a solo artist, Ei Arakawa participated in Frieze projects in 2010, and his work has been presented at a number of major institutions and galleries, including: Tate Modern, London (2012); Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland (2011 and 2009); Le Printemps de Septembre, Toulouse, France (2011); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2011); DAAD Gallery, Berlin (2011); Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria (2011); and Wiels, Brussels, Belgium (2011).

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You are from Japan but based in New York?

Yes, I've lived there for 15 years. I went to School of Visual Arts for my BFA then Bard College for my Masters.

Your presentation at Frieze, *Is this Soup Ambivalent?* is directly related to Fukushima, where you are from. So you have quite a personal relationship to this work?

Yes, that's why I'm doing it. [...]. In a way anyone can do things related to Fukushima, but because I'm from there, but based outside of Japan, I had a strong desire to connect to things there.

When I am outside of Japan, like in New York, all I hear about Fukushima is the media experience, so I felt a bit distant from it. I have a lot of agency in contemporary art because of the performance practice I'm doing; so I started to undertake a dynamic exchange between the contemporary art I'm participating in and the issue of Fukushima, borrowing help from my family.

My brother has a fantasy about the art world—he's not really an artist— so we decided to form a unit called the UNITED BROTHERS. It started after the earthquake, and we deal with Fukushima related issues. One of my brother's fantasies is to be a gallerist, so we created a fake gallery. So that's Green Tea Gallery, and even though our gallery has no sales record, but because Frieze started a live section this year, we could be in Frieze and it was free of charge! [Points to the recorder] Is that recording? Should I hold it? [Picks up recorder] It's like Twin Peaks... [laughs]. So we had this chance to distribute this project at Frieze art fair.... The basic idea is that we serve the soup at 1pm everyday. My mother makes the soup; she came to the UK for the first time. She cooks soup using summer vegetable from Iwaki, Fukushima Japan.

So she harvested the vegetables herself?

She didn't grow them. She bought them. It is dried radish and dried mushroom, and we mix it with UK carrots and other vegetables. And we tested the vegetables with local organisations, and it was found that Cesium-134 and Cesium-137, a very common level of radiation, is zero, or only in very small amounts and I was told it is a natural substance. The level of contamination depends on where the vegetable comes from; the food contamination does not mean that all food from Fukushima is contaminated. There's a lot of structural radiation. But if you see the food at the market, then it has been checked for contamination and in this respect there is a definite scientific result regarding the contamination. But for the people outside of Japan, Fukushima is a media experience so science doesn't matter. It's a very negative effect for the idea of Fukushima.

When Frieze released the information about the performance, I think the PR company that Frieze hired somehow utilised the symbolic power of Fukushima to advertise Frieze art fair. So a lot of media was "Oh wow, Fukushima soup is served at the fair"; but at the same time a few of the sensationalist newspapers are calling it "radioactive soup"—overlooking any nuance.

Is this reaction from the media what you were hoping for? Does it assist in making a point?

Well, the title of the project "*Does this soup taste ambivalent?*", and the reason I used this title is because I didn't want to say: "Yes this soup is safe". It's not a simple promotion about the safety of soup. I wanted to present the question to the audience so I could deal with the people who said "yes" and the people who said "no".

I'm trying to make a platform where debate and discussion can happen. It's not about the generosity of giving soup, but somehow about asking for trust. Sometimes it generates antagonism, for example if you come to the fair with friends, some eat the soup, but some don't want to eat it; that kind of debate and reaction to the media hype and also psychological response to the media thing, is all part of this project.

So it is a contentious work. How do you see it in context of other projects for yourself?

Contentious—like an argument? Yes, the UNITED BROTHERS want to work outside of Japan and create these kind of contentious situations.

But for my own work, I always maintain a resistance to what people want from me as a performance artist. Performance art is not part of the service sector. It should not be like entertainment for the audience, so you have to kind of reposition the situation of the audience and you have to be ready to be contentious too. Also, I don't want it necessarily to be 'right in your face'.

Like Chris Burden?

It doesn't have to use shock tactics either. I wanted to see the relational power in certain contexts and try to figure out how we can, instead of creating certain power relations, interrupt, or resist, or somehow modify. So Frieze art fair is such a highly commercial space, when we applied this soup project I thought it would be interesting to present this question to a Frieze audience, which is made up of a majority of collectors.

So have people been drinking the soup then?

Oh yes. This is day three, and over the last two days, the soup has gone very quickly. Between 30 minutes to 2 hours, about 80 to 100 soups are gone everyday.

Wonderful!

That doesn't mean it's a wonderful thing. Some people—the art visitors to Frieze—are in a hurry to get along to the next thing. They hear about free soup. I don't think they read the information on the wall. I wanted people to read about the risks related to the soup, and to ignite a discussion about the situation. Maybe they are identifying with Tiravanija's communal sharing, but it is functioning differently...

And how long have you been collaborating with your brother then?

I think we started UNITED BROTHERS about three months after the earthquake, so its about three years now.

There is a film showing in the booth at Frieze, alongside the serving of the soup. Tell me about it?

Before 2011 my brother owned three tanning salons in Fukushima. After Fukushima he received compensation from the power company, and what he did was to buy film equipment and a drone. So he became a filmmaker.

So he's a self-educated filmmaker?

Yes, well but I think these days you don't have to be an artist to be visually literate. We live in a super high visual culture now. He's very flamboyant!

He's more flamboyant than me. His sense of design is more contemporary and more fashionable. I noticed that he has become friends with my friends in the art world immediately. And they are very active artists in New York or Berlin art worlds. My brother asked my friends to be cast as characters in the movie. He started to create a science fiction movie about an android from Fukushima...to be honest the film is very bad!

[laughs]

I shouldn't say bad. It's a B-movie!

But I think this movie production functions like a platform for professional artists to relate to UNITED BROTHERS. Meaning very active artists somehow got interested in what we are doing and where we are coming from. Some visited Japan, like Kerstin Brätsch, Richard Aldrich, Henning Bohl, Nikolas Gambaroff, Tobias Madison; they all came to Japan and related to Green Tea Gallery and UNITED BROTHERS. So somehow this B Movie became a connecting tissue, even though the movie itself is enjoyable only to the people who are in it [laughs].

Without him I wouldn't have reached such a broad artist community.

But the soup project isn't light-hearted?

No, no, not really, I'm a performance artist. But when I do a project with my brother, sometimes I externalise my own practice...sometimes I can do more light-hearted things with my brother. But the bottom line is that with this soup project, I wanted to come to a more serious discourse.

Do you feel that it's successful?

I think it's successful on two levels: social media has created a lot of discussion about the soup, which is good; and many of the people that came to the booth understand our intention. I'm not sure we will do this again, but in terms of the context of Frieze, it's perfect.