

Ei Arakawa and Sergei Tcherepnin

TAKA ISHII GALLERY, Tokyo

December 17, 2011–January 14, 2012

The show ended in chaos, typically. On Saturday, January 14th, two incongruous flutists drifted into the exhibition space filled with visitors bending and shaking the cacophonous sculptures. It's a scene that is only an amplified version of any given afternoon during the exhibition, throughout which the artists, Ei Arakawa and Sergei Tcherepnin, spent three hours daily on-site, demonstrating their conceptual instruments installed around the room.

With the series of six works each called *Looking at Listening* (2011)—five hung on the walls and one larger piece fixed to the floor—Arakawa and Tcherepnin created an environment where visitors could explore listening as a kinetic and potentially synesthetic process. The works consisted of metal panels imprinted with images and mounted on felt-draped devices—cool, clean, basic elements assembled like a science fair project, belying neither their mid-century performance art roots nor their unabashed functionality.

The images were sourced from the New York Public Library, where the artists found them catalogued in a file called “Listening” or in other categories which one could consider visual variations on the theme: “Conversation,” “Investigation,” “Town Meetings,” “Audience 1960s–70s.” In each, the act of listening is ostensibly underway, whether it's a ruddy bureaucrat sticking his cocked ear through gilded doors, Billy Crystal taking a question from a talk-show audience, or citizens gathering for political discussions. Transposed from live events to archival documentation to facsimiles inked onto semi-reflective copper, aluminum, and the like, a great distance is felt between the subjects' moments spent communing with sound and the traces of such that appear here.

What was heard has been removed and replaced with songs played via iPod that complement each work: *Looking at Listening: Rainbow Spirals Live* features a composition by Tcherepnin recorded in Brooklyn in 2008; and *Looking at Listening: Patti's New Mantra* is a 2005 Artists Space performance by Arakawa with Sam Lewitt. Arakawa and Tcherepnin, who have collaborated since 2007 on similar projects merging sound, performance, sculpture and social staging, substitute the auditory backdrops of each historical image with music lifted from their own lives as artists.



1 View of Ei Arakawa & Sergei Tcherepnin, Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, 2011–2012.



2 View of Ei Arakawa & Sergei Tcherepnin, Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, 2011–2012.



5 Ei Arakawa & Sergei Tcherepnin, *Looking at Listening: Rainbow Spirals Live*, (detail) 2011.

Speakers are rigged to the cardboard chambers bracing the felt lining of the metal panels, and, when activated, they infuse the artwork with sound waves. Gallery visitors were encouraged to slip on blue latex gloves in order to manhandle the singing sculptures.

The artists demonstrated the manhandling themselves, lovingly maneuvering their sculptures as absurd instruments, prying the plates off their mounts by their edges, muffling them with the fabric, or whirling them like a pinwheel. Not only would a spinning brass square generate a beat absent from the pre-recorded track, but it would also turn the photograph at its center into a muddy gyre. Wrapping and rubbing it with felt not only dulled the sound, but also insinuated the suppression of images. As the visible dissolved in order to make the “heard” take shape, the correlation between looking and listening was blurred.



6 View of Ei Arakawa & Sergei Tcherepnin, Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo, 2011–2012.

During the performance all the sculptures emitted sound at once: standing in the room felt like being in a planetarium show or encircled by echo-locating dolphins—an acutely aural yet distinctly spatial experience. A paper distributed by the artists included a series of rhetorical questions about listening and three concise statements, the last of which was:

“There is always sound. But, you cannot ‘see’ this sound in the beginning. The movement of photographs make us see the sound. Your attention is transformed as sound appears. The photographs (fake photos) allure your body to lean in. Repositioning ears left and right. Once your body leans to the photographs, you are looking at listening.”

But there’s one other element to the show. The artists had rummaged through the gallery’s storage to find a work which they hung on the wall to compliment and comment on their own *Listening*: a 1958 black-and-white photograph by Ikko Narahara called *Garden of Silence*, which depicts a Trappist monk with his fingers arranged in front of his eyes, signing the gesture meaning “night.” A solemn coda to the rest, the image presents an individual who has willed a total conversion of listening into looking (Trappist monks, after all, are sworn to silence), but not so solemn that Arakawa could reserve himself from taking it off the wall and dancing around with it as the sound crescendoed.