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Lisa Zhang, Photography by Sean Donnola

*Ei Arakawa with Gela Patashuri*



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"Gela and I built a model architecture after the New York City corrals," Ei Arakawa all but shouted to me as I blinked amid the buzzing of saws and the whirring of drills one afternoon last month. We were standing in the basement of Artists Space, where an outdoor dining corral was being installed indoors. "It follows the New York City regulations," he added, miming with both hands the thickness of the edges of the structure, "the fences," he continued—he pointed to the free-standing metal fence which would theoretically block incoming traffic and accompanying strips of yellow-and-black caution tape—"even, like, the slope regulations," he said, tracing now with a finger the white PVC pipe which trickled down water. A haphazard-looking aqueduct of translucent tubes carried the water to a plastic bucket and a tangle of wires in a far corner of the room, propped up by a pair of dented cardboard boxes.

Ei Arakawa has shoulder-length black hair and wisps of a mustache and goatee, and his voice is high, lilting. For his first institutional solo show in New York, "Social Muscle Rehab," at Artists Space, the 44-year-old multidisciplinary artist riffs on the city's outdoor dining corrals to meditate on placehood and the repressed dangers and anxieties of the pandemic. The title alludes to the sense of out-of-practice awkwardness which beset many of those who ventured back out into social situations after lockdown measures. A new performance—centered around Naomi Osaka and the media saturation of professional tennis—accompanied the exhibition.

It isn't exactly accurate, of course, to call this a "solo show." Arakawa's collaborator, Gela Patashuri, is compact, sturdy in a way that befits a builder, with a voice to match: low and gravelly, marked with a thick Georgian accent. The two artists first collaborated in 2005, when they worked together on an exhibition at the National Art Center in Tbilisi, Georgia, and have joined forces many times since. Today, Arakawa is wearing a matching dark green tracksuit and white sneakers while Patashuri wears a marled blue T-shirt and cargo shorts; both continually sip half-heartedly from Starbucks iced coffees which melt early in our interview. Though both of them are now U.S.-based, Patashuri in New York and Arakawa in California, each share a particular conception of place which accounts for but also crosses national borders, seeing cultural differences more as shaped by geopolitical and material conditions than indicators for fundamental difference. Part of that stems from their experiences in their respective countries of origin.

"Tbilisi, Georgia, used to be 'The Paris of the East,'" Arakawa said.

"Yes, in the beginning of the twentieth century," Patashuri added. "It was a very interesting time, before the Russians occupied. A lot of famous Modernists came to Georgia."

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By the time Patashuri attended university, however, Georgia's art scene was in a trough between its golden age and a new wave of government interest currently flooding in. "The new generation who were studying in the academy, they had not any space to realize themselves [and their work]," Patashuri said. "We didn't have any art centers—there was only a cemetery where the Tbilisi Museum of Contemporary Art now is."

"At the time [of our collaboration in Georgia], I came from New York," Arakawa added. "And I really liked that sort of difference," he said. "I liked that he's coming from somewhere not so 'art capital.' I'm also coming from Fukushima, Japan, where the art system is not so big."

We were now in the opposite side corner of the room, in front of a large, scuffed-up cardboard box beside a pillar crowned with an ornate cornice.

"This is the ocean water my mother sent," Arakawa said, tugging out a large plastic water bottle. "We used this water for the sculpture. I thought it would be interesting to match the architecture with some kind of water flow, especially ocean water."

It was during COVID-19 that Arakawa and Patashuri began working on this project; because of lockdowns, Arakawa could not visit Japan for nearly two years, and Patashuri for nearly as long. "Fedex was not working at the time," Arakawa said. "I used the slow, you know, ocean shipping. It took two months to travel here." He showed me a picture on his iPhone: a small, older Asian woman with cropped white hair on a day with matching white-gray storm clouds, standing in the surf with pant legs rolled up, holding a large water bottle over her head, triumphantly, like a prize. His mother had gathered the very water which separated them, then sent it along on a ship which sliced, slowly, through that ocean.

The waters of Fukushima, of course, are laced with a different kind of connotation as well. The site of a 2011 nuclear disaster, tons of contaminated water entered the oceans nearby—the Japanese government will release wastewater into the ocean in 2022. "This ocean water is very, in a way, precarious," Arakawa said. "Something in danger, almost. I thought that it could be interesting to be displaced, to share some kind of psychological mood of the pandemic New York City. So it's kind of a very hospitable place, the exhibition—but, at the same time, everybody is more or less damaged through the pandemic."

We trudged upstairs and spilled out onto the cobblestone street of Cortlandt Alley, where we pulled our masks down, and the incessant sounds of the city quickly replaced the noise of the construction of the corrals. Here, Arakawa gestured vaguely at one stretch of sidewalk, where the performance involving tennis and Naomi Osaka would take place, while I eyed the imagined area dubiously.

"Actually, I wonder..." he said, trailing off. I followed his gaze to the cast-iron staircase of Andrew Kreps Gallery, across the street.

"Yeah, we can do right over there," I said.

"It's a more or less quiet place," Patashuri said, agreeably.

Emphasis on "less." We arranged ourselves into an improvisatory triangle, I on the top step, Arakawa two below, and Patashuri standing by the banister, the audio recorder between us and the city ambiance around us. Almost immediately, some form of photoshoot involving skateboards, which clacked noisily against the cobblestone, began to take place. Sirens threaded through our interview, punctuated by honking.

"What drew you toward collaboration?" I asked Patashuri over the din.

"Sorry?" he said.

"Like, why do you want to collaborate? With other artists?"

He hesitated, still unsure.

Arakawa stepped in. "What makes you want to collaborate?" he asked Patashuri.

"Ahh," he said.

It was telling of Patashuri and Arakawa's long-running close collaboration that he stepped in during my own failure to communicate. Both non-conversant in each other's first languages, and second-language speakers of English, their familiarity with each other superseded my native pronunciation. Additionally, Arakawa appealed to Patashuri for certain recollections, expounded on his answers, and Patashuri in turn supplemented Arakawa's answers.

"Most important to me was how I could grow as an artist, to find my way," Patashuri said. "I made my own art—but it wasn't enough for me. Then was when I began to collaborate with others."

In describing his practice and his collaboration with others, it became readily apparent that Patashuri thinks in terms of structures, and that, conversely, language forms the foundation of his physical structures. "A knowledge of formal, and visual arts. Also with knowledge of construction and how materials work together. These three as a tripod work very well for me," he said at one point.

It became apparent, as well, that a single installation or exhibition is not the salient unit of their collaboration. It spans countries, years, even, arguably, generations, and was wrought not only across works but also across people.

"I think he saw and was influenced by a lot of Soviet sculptures and monuments, but also, his father was a poet," Arakawa said about Patashuri. "So he had a kind of performance side and construction side mixed together." Bakhneli Archive, their joint work for the Georgian pavilion of the 2013 Venice Biennale along with their frequent collaborator Sergei Tcherepnin, was based on a collection of poems by Patashuri's father.

If a place can be considered a collaborator, too—and for Arakawa, it should—there is also a sense of learning from the places he exhibits work, which included, early in his career, MoMA and the Tate Modern. "Throughout my practice, I've been invited by different countries because of the art biennales and festivals and stuff," he said. "For me, it was [initially] very arbitrary to be part of this exhibition in Georgia [where I met Gela], but then I started to visit many times, and create more relationships with people. That's where I learned a lot. I learned that institutions can be ephemeral. Because New York museums are often very corporate."

I thought, then, of something Patashuri had said earlier, offhand. "At that time Georgia was very poor," he had said. It's not—Starbucks," he said, gesturing at his cup. "But we said, 'We don't need anything. We can just meet, we'll have a meeting, and plan, and do what we plan.' We had a meeting in the park. We had a meeting in the restaurant."

We had, perhaps, a meeting on the rickety staircase in the middle of the Cortlandt Alley; we'll have, perhaps, a meeting in a dining corral located in the basement of Artists Space.

And not only there: "Seeing this object inside of this art space, we thought it would connect to every time you see a patio after this," Arakawa said. "And you kind of connect in your mind our patio to every other patio in New York City, that each is almost like a monument, too. It's a way to make every patio our sculpture, almost."

I turned the question to Patashuri, too: "What do you want the public to experience from the sculpture?"

But Arakawa hijacked the question. "How are you gonna explain about the Japanese water to your daughter?" he asked.

Patashuri considered. "My daughter. She's nine. There has to be questions, yeah. What is outside, inside? What is art? What is water? Mostly, I think kids will play." He paused, then said: "But if there will be a question, I would like to get an answer, together."