

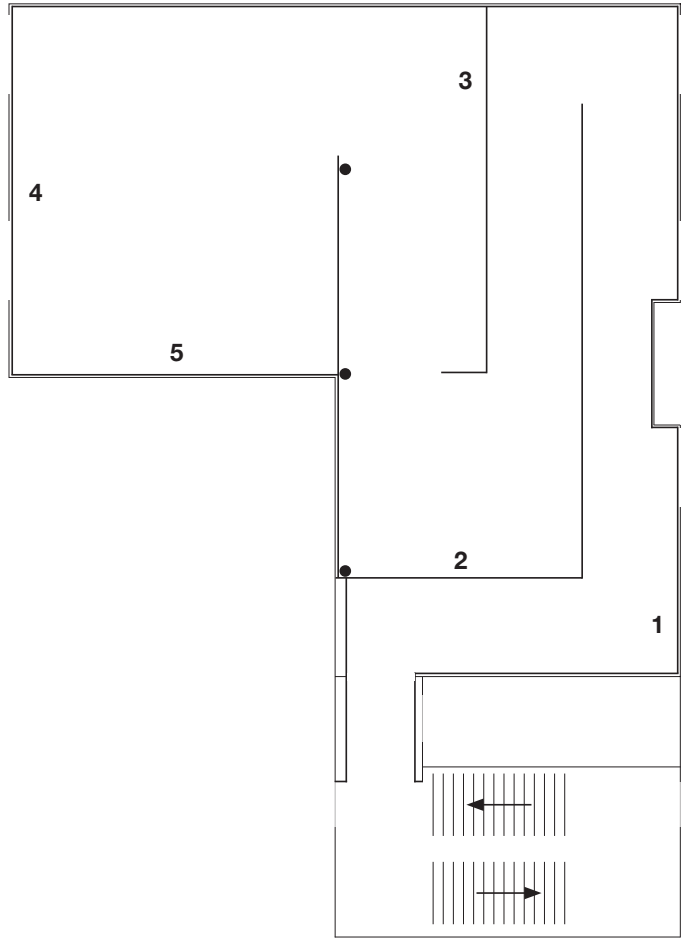
# Ei Arakawa

## *Don't Give Up*

11 MAR – 14 MAY 2023

For *Don't Give Up*, three living American painters (Nicole Eisenman, Laura Owens, Trevor Shimizu) and a couple of dead ones (Mary Cassatt, Alice Neel) mentor Ei Arakawa about the hardship and reality of being a parent and an artist at the same time, a subject which is still a rare topic for female and queer artists (although Cassatt was neither married nor a parent). Arakawa's psychic preparation for planned queer parenthood becomes a maze of hallways and rooms of cardboard in the gallery, through which the visitor encounters singing paintings. Together with the LA based composer Celia Hollander, Arakawa creates an insecure opera of "figuring this out" or "figuring paintings" in need of temporarily connected parenting artisthoods.

Ei Arakawa (\*1977, Fukushima) is a queer Japan-born American performance artist based in Los Angeles since 2019. His exhibitions and performances are often created through fervent collaborations with artists (and at times their artworks), art historians, and with audience members themselves. His activities undertake the lo-fi mimicry, duplication, and embodiment of cultural forms — be they architectural structures, art historical legacies, or organizational systems — to reanimate their potentialities anew.



- 1** *Don't Give Up (Mary Cassatt, Mother and Child, cir 1889, & The Family, cir 1886)*  
2022

82 × 66 cm

4500 LEDs (WS2813, 100 LEDs/m, black) on hand-dyed fabric with grommets, K-8000C controller, 8GB SD card with LedEdit 2021 files, 3x 5V 80A power supply with 22 AWG stranded wire, 1 Tectonic TEAX25C10-8/SP transducer, double corrugated cardboard, Lepai LP-2020TI stereo amplifiers, 1 MP3 media player, vocaloids: Celia Hollander with Ei Arakawa, lyrics: Ei Arakawa  
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Max Mayer

- 2** *Don't Give Up (Laura Owens, Untitled, 2008)*  
2022

137.2 × 121.9 cm

5460 LEDs (WS2813, 60 LED s/m, black) on hand-dyed fabric with grommets, K-8000C controller, 8GB SD card with LedEdit 2021 files, 3Å~ 5V 80A power supply with 22 AWG stranded wire, 1 Tectonic TEAX25C10-8/SP transducer, double corrugated cardboard, Lepai LP-2020TI stereo amplifiers, 1 MP3 media player, vocaloids: Celia Hollander with Ei Arakawa, lyrics: Ei Arakawa  
Private Collection

- 3** *Don't Give Up (Nicole Eisenman, George, cir 2009, & Freddy, 2009)*  
2022

142.2 × 144.8 cm

5309 LEDs (WS2813, 60 LEDs/m, black) on hand-dyed fabric with grommets, K-8000C controller, 8GB SD card with LedEdit 2021 files, 3Å~ 5V 80A power supply with 22 AWG stranded wire, 1 Tectonic TEAX25C10-8/SP transducer, double corrugated cardboard, Lepai LP-2020TI stereo amplifiers, 1 MP3 media player, vocaloids: Celia Hollander with Ei Arakawa, lyrics: Ei Arakawa  
Courtesy of Bobby and Eleanor Cayre, New York

- 4** *Untitled (Little Girl in a Blue Armchair, 1878, & Mary Cassatt, Maternal Caress, 1896)*  
2022

114.3 × 91.4 cm

4608 LEDs (WS2813, 100 LEDs/m, black) on cardboard with grommets, K-8000C controller, 8GB SD card with LedEdit 2021 files, 3 × 5V 80A power supply with 22 AWG stranded wire  
Courtesy of the artist

- 5** *Don't Give Up (Trevor Shimizu, Baby Expert (Walking), 2016)*  
2022

147.3 × 139.7 cm

6720 LEDs (WS2813, 60 LEDs/m, black) on hand-dyed fabric with grommets, K-8000C controller, 8GB SD card with LedEdit 2021 files, 3Å~ 5V 80A power supply with 22 AWG stranded wire, Tectonic TEAX25C10-8/SP transducer, double corrugated cardboard, Lepai LP-2020TI stereo amplifiers, MP3 media player, vocaloids: Celia Hollander with Ei Arakawa, lyrics: Ei Arakawa  
Courtesy of the artist and Overduin & Co.

All others vocaloids in collaboration with Celia Hollander

## My Little Pumpkin(s)

Much has been written on the social reproduction of power that maintains the organizing principles of life under capitalism. As Johanna Brenner and Barbara Laslett explain: Social reproduction includes, among other things, how food, clothing, and shelter are made available for immediate consumption, how the maintenance and socialization of children is accomplished, how care is provided, and how sexuality is socially constructed.<sup>1</sup> The profundity of what they grasp points us to how reproductive labor, as it plays out both domestically and institutionally, and its co-relations with gender, race and sexuality, come together to deepen our understanding of the quotidian assemblies of sociality and abstracted capital.

For scholars and other contributors to the theory of social reproduction that precede and follow Brenner and Laslett, placing emphasis on the ways in which the production of goods and services is linked to the production of life offers robust entry points in the struggle against inequality and corresponding violence, insofar as it makes appear alienated experiences and introduces sites of production. Though social reproduction itself isn't a new concept, finding origin in Marxist tradition, we need not look that far back in time to see how it operates beyond preoccupations with class and economic value. Contemporary developments like privatization and reduction of social services, advancements in reproductive technologies, and the 2022 U.S. Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*<sup>2</sup> – including its requisite rebuke – have brought to view daily and renewed connections with the interplay of autonomy, privacy, and state sovereignty in equal measure.<sup>3</sup>

Metabolizing these urgent, perennial concerns in *Don't Give Up*, Ei Arakawa takes us through his complex labyrinth of emotions and reflections – reified as a cardboard maze – as he prepares for life as an artist-parent. He draws our attention to the attendant anxieties and speculations of parenthood at every turn. Simultaneously tender and chilling, the exhibition is soundtracked by an omnidirectional chorus of synthesized phrases created using vocaloids with the help of composer Celia Hollander. The lyrics are culled from conversations with artist friends and appear as written text on the surface of the cardboard walls. Arakawa elaborately maps his fractured autofiction, deploying his noted collaborative approach to further lay bare the various negotiations made as a result of the co-constitutions of social relations instigated by reproductive labor.

Located somewhere between realism and speculative fiction, performance and installation, Arakawa's vertiginous exhibition, in all its formal dissonances, takes semiotic and pictorial references from painters including Mary Cassatt, Laura Owens, Trevor Shimizu, and Nicole Eisenman,<sup>4</sup> all of whom are recognized for their idiosyncratic brush stroke technique. Here, each artist becomes an affectionate teacher. Arakawa seemingly invokes the adage "it takes a village to raise a child" in his LED reworking of their respective paintings that articulate the affective pleasures of childcare as well as intimate bond of mother and child.

These pointillist renderings in Arakawa's corrugated theater offer a materialist perspective on the very peripheral experiences that lay claim to the reproduction of the social relations of capitalism, and thereby production of meaning and value; positions and interactions that work within and well beyond the walls of any gallery or museum. For in the same way art requires a public, so does capitalism require reproductive labor to replenish and safeguard its tenacious logics. What we bear witness to is the creative and psychic excesses of an artist grappling with these pressing tensions with the help of colleagues – alive and deceased.<sup>5</sup>

Conditions that would have otherwise seemed mutually prohibitive – queer, immigrant, working artist seeking to have a baby and start a family outside of traditional protocols – further showcase what scholar Susan Ferguson states is the necessary yet contradictory social labors that renew and resist the diffuse workings of patriarchal and capitalist dynamics.<sup>6</sup> It's this sincere dialectic that remains palpable in Arakawa's performative installation. He isn't so much concerned with just describing his lived experience – or simply presenting childcare as a theme – but also

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1 See Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner, "Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives", *Annual Review of Sociology* 15 (1989), 383-404.

2 *Roe v. Wade* (1973) granted women the right to abortion under the constitutional right to privacy.

3 For additional information on the Supreme Court case *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* (2022), which overruled both *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992), see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dobbs\\_v.\\_Jackson\\_Women%27s\\_Health\\_Organization](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dobbs_v._Jackson_Women%27s_Health_Organization).

4 In its 2022 iteration at Overduin and Co. in Los Angeles, *Don't Give Up* also featured Arakawa's LED reworking of Alice Neel's painting *Hartley on the Rocking Horse* (1943) and *Andrew* (1978).

5 It should be noted that though Mary Cassatt never had children of her own, she often depicted children and tender acts of childcare in her paintings, like in the works *Mother and Child* (1889), *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair* (1878) and *Maternal Caress* (1896). All three paintings are reinterpreted by Ei Arakawa.

6 See Ferguson's "Social Reproduction: What's the Big Idea?": <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/social-reproduction-theory-ferguson>.

generously tasks himself with explaining – however tersely – the differentiated parts of a particularly queer sociality. In so doing, he extends the salient question author Sophie Lewis provocatively ponders in her book *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (2019): Is it easier to imagine life without capitalism than it is to imagine life without the family?<sup>7</sup>

For Canadian-American artist and writer Shulamith Firestone, abolishing the nuclear family system and vaginal childbirth is central to combatting the oppression and exploitation of women and children specifically. As instrumental as her argument – proposed in her book *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for A Feminist Revolution* (1970) – may be, its prescriptive points of determinations present a problematic that weakens material potentials. From what neoliberalism has demonstrated, organization of power is variegated and the processes that govern its operation are not easily legible or reducible. Yet, it's precisely the location and centering of the production of life as an essential locus in the networked production of values and meaning that substantiates Arakawa's revelation that there are probably a "thousand million ways to raise a child".<sup>8</sup>

Now that we have technologies that ostensibly make childbirth less, in the words of Firestone, "barbaric"<sup>9</sup> and "like shitting a pumpkin",<sup>10</sup> further frictions and conditions of possibilities become apparent that force us to re-evaluate the constituencies of alienated labor and being. As Ei annotates with *Don't Give Up*, there are a multitude of proverbial pumpkins yet to shit out – albeit with different metabolites and consistencies. His playfully staged operatic études proffer a non-reductive lens into a charged interiority, platforming capacious discussions that take place against the backdrop of ecological and economic precarity.

Mark Pierson

Writer, curator and public administrator living in Los Angeles

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7 Author Madeline Lane-Mckinley's incisive 2019 review of Lewis's *Full Surrogacy Now* for Los Angeles Review of Books offers a worthwhile starting point to Lewis's points: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/unthinking-the-family-in-full-surrogacy-now>.

8 Excerpted lyrics from Ei Arakawa's *Don't Give Up*.

9 Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2003), 180.

10 Ibid., 181: "Like shitting a pumpkin, a friend of mine told me when I inquired about the Great-Experience-You're-Missing. What's wrong-with-shitting-shitting-can-be-fun ..."

## Events

1 APR, 18:30

Visite commentée des Ami-e-s avec Andreas Hochuli (Fr/De)

13 MAY

Museum Night: Ei Arakawa's performance at La Motta (100 years)

More information on the website

## Commented tours, mediation and school visits

Registration and request for information by e-mail to [mediation@friart.ch](mailto:mediation@friart.ch) or by phone 026 323 23 51

Program developed by Fanny Delarze (Kollektiv Ortie)

## Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg

Nicolas Brulhart, Estelle Negro, Sacha Rappo, Julie Folly, Léa Depestel, Pierrick Brégeon/Eurostandard, Chi-Binh Trieu, Fabian Stücheli, Stephan Weber, Jörg Bosshard, Arunà Canevascini, Nicolas Beyeler, Flavio Da Silva, Thibault Villard, Esengo Miere, Iyla Chapuis, Rojda Mavigok, Pascale Bonin, Guillaume Baeriswyl, Anja Delz, Jack Sims, Marie Gyger, Varun Kumar, Atelier 48, TRNSTN radio, Clémence de Weck and the committee of Fri-Art, the Friends of Friart, reception staff, Conceição Silva Carvalho, Aliona Cazacu

## The artist would like to thank

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