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“Here and There:” Energy Crisis and Environmental Concern in Contemporary Performance

Arts

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Introduction

In 2011 Japan, on a Friday afternoon, a catastrophic earthquake struck the Fukushima prefecture. Then the tsunami caused the reactors of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plants to melt and leak out.¹ This unexpected disaster called attention to crisis management, environmental concern of nuclear radiation, and geopolitics in the aftermath of accidents.² In the wake of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, artists attempt to explore ways to present the motif of 3/11 beyond geographic confinement—beyond Japan. With a consideration that not everyone is able

¹ For an anecdotal and insider view of the Fukushima Daiichi site and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, or TEPCO, see Margaret Steen, “Fukushima Points to Need for Sharing Crisis-Management Talent | Stanford Graduate School of Business,” *Insights by Stanford Business*, last modified February 07, 2012, <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/fukushima-points-need-sharing-crisis-management-talent>.

² For press release of the TEPCO Internal Investigation Committee Final Report, see “Release of the Fukushima Nuclear Accidents Investigation Report,” *TEPCO Releases • Announcements*, June 20th, 2012, https://www.tepco.co.jp/en/press/corp-com/release/2012/1205638_1870.html. See also “Safety Measures Implementation at Kashiwazaki-Kariwa Nuclear Power Station,” TEPCO, accessed November 21, 2023, <https://www.tepco.co.jp/en/nu/kk-np/safety/index-e.html>.

For a video of the current state of Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, see “The current situation at Fukushima Daiichi NPS” –From 3.11 toward the future- (ver,Jan.2017), TEPCO Releases •

Announcements | Photo & Video Library - Videos, January 16, 2017, video, 9:09, https://www.tepco.co.jp/en/news/library/archive-e.html?video_uuid=o6iw41m6&catid=61795. For the decommissioning roadmap, see “東京電力ホールディングス(株) 福島第一原子力発電所の廃止措置等に向けた 中長期ロードマップ (案) | 平成 29 年 9 月 26 日 | 廃炉・汚染水対策関係閣僚等会議,” September 26, 2017, https://www.tepco.co.jp/nu/fukushima-np/roadmap/2017/images2/t170926_04-j.pdf.

For an interview with TEPCO’s Agile Energy X, see Andy Binns, “Corporate Explorers to Watch: Kenji Tateiwa, CEO Agile Energy X,” last modified March 1, 2023, <https://changelogic.com/blog/corporate-explorers-to-watch-kenji-tateiwa-ceo-agile-energy-x/>. For the new company Agile Energy X, Inc., see “Formation of Agile Energy X, Inc., a New Company on a Mission to Accelerate the Introduction of Renewable Energy By Flexibly creating power demand, Agile Energy X will create digital and environmental value while mitigating grid congestion,” *TEPCO Power Grid*, September 21, 2022, https://www.tepco.co.jp/en/pg/about/newsroom/press/archives/2022/20220921_01.html; “Agile Energy X, TRIPLE-1, TEPCO Power Grid to implement distributed computing that hybridizes renewable energy and cutting-edge semiconductors,” *TRIPLE-1 NEWS*, accessed November 21, 2023, https://triple-1.com/en/news/release2022-12_2/.

Special thanks to Kenji Tateiwa 立岩健二 (tateiwa.kenji@nifty.com), Founder/CEO of Agile Energy X (<https://agileenergyx.co.jp/en/>), an alumni of Stanford Graduate School of Business - Stanford MBA Class of 2004, for source informations.

to have access to the nuclear zone, how do artists respond to 3/11 without direct physical proximity to Fukushima? How do overseas Japanese artists represent what took place back in their homeland—Japan? How do people outside Japan gain the access to experience and respond to 3/11? In an interview with regard to his performance art *Does this soup taste ambivalent?* (2014) (fig. 1), a contemporary Japanese artist Ei Arakawa touched upon this representational dilemma of “here and there,” and attempted to mediate a geographic gap between New York (where the artist works) and Fukushima (where the artist comes from), and intended to bring his family (his brother and mother) to Frieze London to reach a geographic balance between Fukushima and the international world.³

Ei Arakawa the New York based artist has a strong personal connection to his hometown Fukushima. After the 3/11 disaster, given his dislocation in New York and his distance from Fukushima, Ei Arakawa decided to borrow the agency of the performance practice and cooperated with his brother Tomoo Arakawa as UNITED BROTHERS to participate in the artistic representation of Fukushima. In this conceptual performance project on 3/11 in 2014 Frieze Art Fair, Ei and Tomoo Arakawa aimed to “give people outside the Japan to experience the anxiety and dilemma over the safety of food in Fukushima in a direct corporeal way.”⁴ Besides UNITED BROTHERS, their mother bought ingredients from a neighbourhood sixty kilometres south of the power plant and flew to London to help cook soup in Green Tea Gallery

³ Peter Yeung, “UNITED BROTHER Serve Soup From Fukushima at Frieze London,” *Whitewall* (blog), October 15, 2014, <http://www.whitewallmag.com/art/united-brothers-serve-soup-from-fukushima-at-frieze-london>.

⁴ Jake Wallis Simons, “Would you eat Fukushima soup? The all-consuming world of Frieze Art Fair,” *CNN Style* (Blog), October 16, 2014 (10:31 AM EDT), <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/16/travel/frieze-art-fair-storify/>.

in London.⁵ Their performance reviewed the difficulty of how to present what happen in Japan to people in London.

The performance drew on food, one of our basic necessities, from Fukushima—site of 2011 nuclear disaster—to emblematically stand for areas haunted by radioactivity in the wake of 3/11. The piece provoked a psychological dilemma for London people to decide whether or not to try the soup; an action of eating the soup further invited and incorporated the audience's experience and response into the performance project. Audience's proximity to the soup, in some cases ingestion, associates people in London with post-3/11 radioactive exposures in Japan. The multi-sensory nature of the soup incorporated heat, smell, taste and viewing creation into cooking. Compared to photographs documenting disaster areas, does an incorporation of food make it more effective than two-dimensional photographs to present a concern of the risk of post-3/11 nuclear radiations in Japan? Does an involvement of eating food make it more accessible for the audience in London to experience what happens in Japan despite geographical distance?

The significance of the soup manifested through the UNITED BROTHERS' performance project stands out and further leads me to consider an incorporation of food in other art representations. The scene that UNITED BROTHERS together with their mother made soup in the gallery resonates with Rirkrit Tiravanija's (1961-) 1992 exhibition entitled *Untitled (Free)* (fig. 2) in New York, in which Tiravanija served rice and Thai curry for free in the gallery. Given that UNITED BROTHERS draws on Japanese soup to allude to the 3/11 disaster in Japan and that Rirkrit Tiravanija draws on Thai curry to suggest his Thai heritage, this ethnical and cultural

⁵ Grace Wang, "DOES THIS SOUP TASTE AMBIVALENT?," *Opening Ceremony Art Talks* (Blog), October 21, 2014 (4:00 PM), <http://blog.openingceremony.com/entry.asp?pid=10508>.

reference indicated through food also reminds me of another socially-engaged art practice *Conflict Kitchen* (2010-) (fig. 3), a takeout restaurant in Pittsburgh only serving food from countries from which the United States is currently in conflict with.

Bringing comparative examples of *Conflict Kitchen* and Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free/Still)* with *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?*, I attempt to extend a geographical boundary between "here and there" to those invisible yet crucial boundaries with regard to human relations. Other figurative moments of "here and there" can suggest boundaries between artists and spectators/participants, between social environment and human beings and between various ethical groups. An examination of an incorporation of food in art performances not only embodies repeated moments of "here and there," but also shows that an incorporation of the food enables performance arts to perform the representational difficulty of *boundaries*, to provide a corporeal medium to raise concerns on safety, and to take advantage of its *taste* to unite people from heterogeneous backgrounds. Repeated in art practices and social media, an incorporation of food is able to produce a new micro-social and micro-political narrative to reflect on the condition of food safety, human safety and community across time and space.

Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?

In 2014 London, an artistic/sibling duo Ei and Tomoo Arakawa working under the name UNITED BROTHERS presented a live performance work *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?* at the Frieze Art Gallery. UNITED BROTHERS, with the help of their mother, made soup with ingredients from Fukushima, offered free soup to Frieze visitors at 1 pm every day. The soup was made up of dried radish and dried shiitake mushroom, and mixed with UK carrots and other

vegetables.⁶ Bright colors of the ingredients—green, yellow and red—left a visually pleasing impression on the audience and mediated the disturbing implication of nuclear radiation through a mobilization of audience’s multiple senses—through the heat, smell, taste and viewing creation of the soup for instance.

In terms of artistic representations of 3/11, photographers like Handa Yasushi and Lieko Shiga went inside the nuclear zone to give people outside Fukushima or outside Japan a visual access to the disastrous areas. Rather than offer a visual re-presentation of 3/11 to an overseas audience, *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?* allows London people to have empathy with Fukushima people through haptic perceptions and active engagements into the performance, which can hardly be achieved by looking at documentary photos. London people were able to psychologically experience a choice people from Fukushima have to make every day—whether or not to consume potentially radioactive food. Their proximity to the soup also enabled them to physically perceive the potential risk of radioactivity. The soup made with ingredients from Fukushima served as a synecdoche to emblematically stand for toxicity and potential radioactivity from Japan, suggesting a presence of Fukushima—the “there”—through material identity to people in London—the “here.”

Drawing on the agency of food, UNITED BROTHERS’ conceptual performance more effectively dealt with a representational difficulty of “here and there” and further provoked a psychologic dilemma for London people. *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?* not only targeted at people who responded with “yes” and “no,” but also embraced people with an “ambivalent” attitude towards whether or not to eat the soup. For instance, the Frieze art fair’s co-founder

⁶ Sherman Sam, “A conversation with Ei Arakawa,” *OCULA* (Blog), October 19, 2014, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/ei-arakawa/>.

Matthew Slotover admitted that he was skeptical about eating the soup.⁷ The media referred to conceptual performance in the headlines as “nuclear soup”⁸ or “Fukushima soup”⁹ in a deceptively simple way. As for people outside Japan, anything related Fukushima can become a media sensation corresponding to a social presumption of potential radioactivity. According to Ei Arakawa, the PR company hired by Frieze also took advantage of this sensational effect of Fukushima to advertise Frieze art fair per se.¹⁰

Nevertheless, local NPO organisation examined the vegetables and detected no radioactive elements—Cesium-134 and Cesium-137—in vegetables. Main ingredients of the soup—shiitake mushroom and daikon radish—were also certificated safe by the Japanese Farmers’ Association with no radioactivity detected. Ei Arakawa clarified that “I don’t want people to be anxious. I wanted to present the choice whether you eat or not because it’s good to have discussion, and activate discourse about the stress of the Fukushima disaster.”¹¹

Furthermore, UNITED BROTHERS’ mother’s presence to cook the soup provisionally transformed the gallery into a gendered and domestic space, which may evoke a sense of comfort

⁷ Grace Wang, “DOES THIS SOUP TASTE AMBIVALENT?,” *Opening Ceremony Art Talks* (Blog), October 21, 2014 (4:00 PM), <http://blog.openingceremony.com/entry.asp?pid=10508>.

⁸ Jessica Holtaway, “What is the micro-political significance of Frieze Art Fair’s ‘Nuclear Soup’?,” *Jessica Holtaway* (Blog), October 22, 2014 (7:15 AM), <https://jessicaholtaway.wordpress.com/2014/10/22/what-is-the-micro-political-significance-of-frieze-art-fairs-nuclear-soup/>.

⁹ Jake Wallis Simons, “Would you eat Fukushima soup? The all-consuming world of Frieze Art Fair,” *CNN Style* (Blog), October 16, 2014 (10:31 AM EDT), <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/16/travel/frieze-art-fair-storify/>.

¹⁰ Sherman Sam, “A conversation with Ei Arakawa,” *OCULA* (Blog), October 19, 2014, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/ei-arakawa/>.

¹¹ Peter Yeung, “UNITED BROTHERS Serve Soup From Fukushima at Frieze London,” *Whitewall* (blog), October 15, 2014, <http://www.whitewallmag.com/art/united-brothers-serve-soup-from-fukushima-at-frieze-london>.

at home. Between 30 minutes to 2 hours, about 80 to 100 soups were gone every day.¹² As for their mother, this piece meant more of an extension of cooking and offering free food than a conceptual performance. With cooking as part of the live performance, a gesture of sharing free food with fairgoers transformed spectators into participants and blurred the demarcation between the artist and the audience. An action of eating the soup further invited the audience's corporeal experience and response into the performance project. Audience's active response and physical perception kept constituting the performance practice and expanded the dynamic body of the live performance. As a consequence, cooking food in the gallery not only alters a correlation among artists, spectators and the performance per se, but also forms a new community that gathers people who are concerned about 3/11 and free food together.

Food Safety

Frieze Fairs' have an enduring connection with food: *Grizedale arts* bought in an experimental dining experience for visitors in 2012 and *FOOD 1971/2013* in 2013 was an art piece/restaurant where artists were invited to perform/cook on a stage.¹³ Following this tradition, *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?* also draws on food to reflect on 3/11 in Frieze London. Daikon radish, the main ingredient of the soup, is a main food in Fukushima prefecture. In the wake of the 3/11 disaster, thousands of residents in Fukushima were ravaged with permanent ailments particularly, especially after consuming certain food and water (including Daikon

¹² Sherman Sam, "A conversation with Ei Arakawa," *OCULA* (Blog), October 19, 2014, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/ei-arakawa/>.

¹³ Harriet Thorpe, "Frieze London 2014," *Studio International* (Blog), November 7, 2014, <http://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/frieze-art-fair-london-2014-review>.

radish).¹⁴ Building upon this social context, UNITED BROTHERS incorporated daikon radish—a metonym of Japanese everyday scene and Fukushima prefecture—into ingredients of the soup and emphasized the disturbing origin of Fukushima to provoke London people’s doubt about food safety near the nuclear area. It is a physical proximity to the soup that enables many London people to build up a relation with post-3/11 radioactive exposures in Japan and have a corporeal reflection on food safety. They were able to psychologically experience a choice people from Fukushima have to make every day and to physically perceive the potential radioactivity through haptic engagements with the soup. Ingestion of the soup into one’s own body challenges a psychological concern of being exposed to nuclear radiation.

Certificated safe by the Japanese Farmers’ Association, the soup in *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?* attempted to create an opening-ending platform to involve active discourses. With a consideration of audience’s haptic perceptions, the soup as an agency to represent 3/11 also points out the indispensable role of food as daily necessities and its close association with human body. The corporeal empathy London audience experienced through *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?* not only reminds them of nuclear radioactivity in Japan, but also draws their attention to the safety of their own body. In addition to a reflection on physiological safety provoked by the risk of nuclear radiation, Rirkrit Tiravanija’s 1992 exhibition entitled *Untitled* and a socially-engaged art practice *Conflict Kitchen* offers insights into how to deal with invisible boundaries such as an interaction among people as well as a correlation between a community/individual and a social environment, and how to achieve a more comfortable/suitable

¹⁴ Peter Yeung, “UNITED BROTHER Serve Soup From Fukushima at Frieze London,” *Whitewall* (blog), October 15, 2014, <http://www.whitewallmag.com/art/united-brothers-serve-soup-from-fukushima-at-frieze-london>.

relation between the human body and external social context. Just as an evocation of homelike comfort produced by the mother's presence to cook soup mediates a relation between viewers and an environment of the museum, the "safe" state of a human body in a social context of museum or various ethnical groups might also be fulfilled through the multi-sensory nature of food per se.

Food and Community

Much of UNITED BROTHERS' *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?*'s idea of cooking and serving food in the gallery as well as an experiment on human interactions alludes to Rirkrit Tiravanija's 1992 exhibition entitled *Untitled (Free)* at 303 Gallery in New York, where Tiravanija served rice and Thai curry for free. As a pioneer of the Relational Aesthetics movement, the New York and Chiang Mai based Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija deconstructs the concept of art into its relational components, focuses on human interactions and often goes beyond performance to create socially-engaged conceptual works that blur the boundaries of art in novel ways and bridge division between public and private.¹⁵ In *Untitled (Free)*, Rirkrit Tiravanija emptied out the office of 303 Gallery and installed a makeshift kitchen with fridge, hot plates, rice steamers, tables, and stools.¹⁶ As Rirkrit Tiravanija were cooking Thai curry, museum-goers not only watched him cooking, but also dropped in and served him- or herself freely. Similar to the viewers' active participation in *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?*, viewers of *Untitled (Free)* also became within the performance or part of the art-making process as they ate curry and talked with friends or new acquaintances.

¹⁵ "Rirkrit Tiravanija," *Artsy*, accessed December 17, 2016, <https://www.artsy.net/artist/rirkrit-tiravanija>.

¹⁶ Jerry Saltz, "Conspicuous Consumption," *New York Art (Blog)*, October 23, 2007, <http://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/31511/>.

Centering on an experiment of relational aesthetics, both pieces incorporate a process of cooking and serving food as the main part of the live performance, breaks the boundary between viewer and artist/artwork and invite the viewer to interact with art in a more sociable way. Through ingesting food, these viewers not only shift from passive viewing to active participation, but also become an essential ingredient in the performance. Within such a cooking-as-art performance, food as an agency produces experimental relations among people and performs the function of art as sustenance, healing and communion.

In addition to an engagement into relational aesthetics, both pieces carry on a strong autobiographical element manifested through food. Rirkrit Tiravanija shows his Thai heritage through Thai curry and UNITED BROTHERS refers to their hometown through food from Fukushima. Given that both Thai curry and Japanese soup are foreign to American and European audience, an incorporation and exoticization of *foreign* food not only gives the performance art a cultural and ethnical implication of the imagined “there,” but also performs a cultural and racial integration through a moment of various people eating one type of food together. Thus, an incorporation of food enables performance art to attract viewers, mobilize human interactions and create a sense of community within an art-as-cooking environment. The artist’s choice of what kind of food to choose also enables the performance to raise concerns about one particular culture or ethnical groups.

Take another socially-engaged art practice *Conflict Kitchen* based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for instance. *Conflict Kitchen*, a take out restaurant established in 2010, only serves cuisine from regions which the United States is in conflict with, including Iran, Afghanistan, Cuba, North Korea, Palestine and Venezuela. The restaurant offers a basic menu of traditional

meals from one “conflict” country and replaces it with a new menu from a different place every five months: Kubideh from Iran, bolani from Afghanistan, arepas from Venezuela, and bibimbop from North Korea.¹⁷ Framed by a colorful facade, the take out window often creates a platform for public dialogue. The food line presents a space for hungry Pittsburghers to engage with people and places the US media consistently distorts and misrepresents. The takeout counter is staffed by chefs and public artists to who are trained to facilitate conversations about the featured country for each time; each food wrapper is printed with personal profiles of people who live in the country being celebrated as well as articles on the country’s food, art, religion, culture and government.¹⁸

Conflict Kitchen recognises the indispensable and effective role of food in human interactions, and further draws on food as a transmission instrument for cross-cultural dialogue and political discussion. Food in this socially-engaged art practice serves as a synecdoche to represent a country, an ethnical group or a political inclination, and as a site for cultural exchange among people from heterogeneous backgrounds. Through tasting a new meal, interacting with fellow customers and reading statements on the food wrapper, people from different social, geographical and political contexts are able to express their points of view, to hear other voices and to become part of the ensuing conversation. Therefore, *Conflict Kitchen* breaks down exclusive boundaries set up by one particular ethnical background, but rather produces an open micro-political platform for a community of people who share the same political tendency or the same *taste*. The psychological choice provoked by UNITED BROTHERS becomes a political

¹⁷ Chelsea Haines, “Jon Rubin: Conflict Kitchen,” *Guernica* (Blog), January 16, 2015, <https://www.guernicamag.com/jon-rubin-conflict-kitchen/>.

¹⁸ “Case Study: Conflict Kitchen,” *Beautiful Trouble*, accessed December 17, 2016, <http://beautifultrouble.org/case/conflict-kitchen/>.

choice in *Conflict Kitchen* of whether or not to eat food from a country which the United States is currently in conflict with. Some people do believe it is a political act to eat from *Conflict Kitchen* three days a week because they recognize that they are financially supporting the premise of the project.¹⁹ Believing that the quickest way to a person's heart is through their stomach, *Conflict Kitchen* seeks to build a cross-cultural understanding, form a more inclusive community and promote peace globally by introducing U.S. people to the food and culture of those "conflict" places.²⁰

Conclusion

An examination of UNITED BROTHERS' *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?*, Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* and *Conflict Kitchen* reviews attempts to mediate a representational gap between "here and there," between the artists and the viewer and between different ethnical groups. Besides London, UNITED BROTHERS also performed the process of cooking soup with Fukushima ingredients in Los Angeles. Besides the 1992 exhibition, Rirkrit Tiravanija re-created *Untitled (Free)* in 1995, 2007 and 2011. Besides purchasing food from *Conflict Kitchen*, people write and read the statements on the wrapper, take pictures of them with the food, and post those pictures on Facebook or Twitter to claim their political tendency. Through a process of self-reproduction and an engagement with mass media, these socially-engaged art practices gradually fabricate a micro-social and micro-political narrative to give thought to the notion of safety and community across time and space, and transform the role of food as a tool in

¹⁹ Chelsea Haines, "Jon Rubin: Conflict Kitchen," *Guernica* (Blog), January 16, 2015, <https://www.guernicamag.com/jon-rubin-conflict-kitchen/>.

²⁰ "Case Study: Conflict Kitchen," *Beautiful Trouble*, accessed December 17, 2016, <http://beautifultrouble.org/case/conflict-kitchen/>.

performance into a part of the performance. An incorporation of food keeps constituting to the performance as a main ingredient and further enlivens the performance into a dynamic body.

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Image



Fig. 1 UNITED BROTHERS, *Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?*, 2014. A live performance at Frieze London. Photo courtesy of United Brothers.



Fig. 2 Rirkrit Tiravanija. *Untitled (Free)*. 1992. Refrigerator, table, chairs, wood, drywall, food and other materials; dimensions variable.



Fig. 3 Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski, *Conflict Kitchen*, 2010-present. A take out restaurant that only serves cuisine from regions with which the United States is in conflict.