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Ei Arakawa, *M for Mavoists (and so on . . .)*, 2010

Born in 1977 in Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture, Ei Arakawa is an internationally active performance artist based in New York. While he leads a few collectives, including “Grand Openings,” “Togawa Fan Club,” and “United Brothers,” his collectivist strategy is fluid, forming an expansive team of collaborators from project to project. He has also a special knack for “mobilizing anybody,” forcibly involving viewers intent on just watching his performance. His performative scenes tend to scatter rather than coalesce. He intentionally creates chaos, carefully circumventing the viewers’ expectation and attempt to grasp an overall meaning or a hidden structure. Call it free-form or diffusive, but it is too facile to call it “multifaceted.” In my imagination, he may have an extra screw in his head.

His 2010 work, *M for Mavoists (and so on . . .)* best exemplifies his mode of operation. In brief, it was a site-specific and event-specific work, staged at the University of Michigan to cheer on postwar Japanese art historians. Specifically, it was commissioned as part of an international symposium of postwar Japanese art history co-organized by the school’s art museum and art history department with PoNJA-GenKon in conjunction with the exhibition *Art, Anti-Art, Non-Art* held there. (PoNJA-GenKon is a scholarly listserv for those interested in post-1945 Japanese art, co-founded in 2003 by myself; Arakawa has been a member from early on.)

“M” in the title derived from the school’s initial, which has been given a distinct design and functioned as its logo and adorned its sport teams’ uniforms and various campus products. Like many other American colleges, Michigan’s football team represents the school, with the cheerleaders’ squad holding a special cachet on campus.

In his mind, M could be associated with two famous films, Fritz Lang’s *M* and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Dial M for Murder*. However, M was also for Mavo, a 1920s vanguard collective, and its members in Japanese art. Hence, the title of *M for Mavoists*. (The construction of “M for ___” also came from literary and everyday conventions.)

From there, he thought of enumerating “M for many” in his scattering mode, and posted a question “What are M’s in art?” at the Ponja listserv in his “mobilizing anybody” mode. It is notable that the audience participation already began at this point, because the core audience of his symposium-related commission encompassed the symposium presenters and attendees, many of whom (including myself) were members of the listserv.

His performance was sited at an atrium next to the museum’s auditorium. Highlights of its proceedings can be seen in a video included in the present exhibition. The idea of “M for many” was represented in various ways. M’s on football uniforms were projected on a large screen. M’s were created

on the floor by yellow tape. Audience members were made to hold placards, each adorned by a large M. Arakawa himself wore a T-shirt in yellow, the school color, with a large black M, and repeatedly shouted “M, M, M, M.” The operational concept of his performance was “M for movement.” The first movement was a traditional Bhangra dance presented by members of Wolverine Bhangra. As I looked around, I saw pairs of volunteers or audience members holding up and swaying a few large panels, which incorporated such M’s as “Miki Tomio’s *mimi* (ears),” “Metabolism,” “Muramatsu Gallery,” and “Manga journal for manga elites, *Com*,” represented by both words and images, together with the M logo. In synch with the punchy sounds of Bhangra instruments, the audience shook black-and-orange pompoms on sticks, showing the spirit of audience participation.

When the dance was over, Arakawa shouted “M, M, M, M,” “Stand up for M,” and “Move, move,” but the audience did not budge, although they kept shaking the pompoms. Undeterred, he grabbed me and shouted, “Follow Reiko Tomii,” issuing the order of “Walk, walk.” Most of the audience members eventually began to walk, with the full line-up of 15 large graphic panels also marching around. The third and final movement was presented by a female modern ballet team. Instructing the young dancers to “Spread, spread,” Arakawa himself twirled around, revealing his brief training in classic ballet.

My description of the performance above is an account by a forcibly mobilized audience member. As I now recall that festive occasion, I realize that Arakawa was paying tribute to postwar Japanese art as a flâneur who lightheartedly roams in history. I frankly envy his freedom, the kind impossible for serious scholars.

—Reiko Tomii, August 25, 2011
(Translated by author from the Japanese original)

M’s in Arakawa’s performance

(in random order)

Miki Tomio’s *mimi* (ears), *Mokei 1000-en satsu* (*Model 1,000-yen Note*), Metabolism, Mavoists, Muramatsu Gallery, Matsuzawa Yutaka, Mono-ha (“Things School”), *Manatsu no taiyō ni chōsen suru modan āto jikken-ten* (*The Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Sun*), *Mizue*, Manga journal for manga elites *Com*, *Manhattan jisatsu misui* (*Manhattan Suicide Addict*), *Minawa wa tsukurareru* (*Waterbubbles Are Made*), *Mitaka tenmei hanten jūtaku* (*Reversible Destiny Lofts Mitaka*), Matsumoto Toshio