

Andrea Zittel

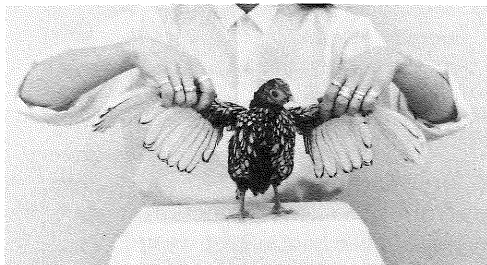
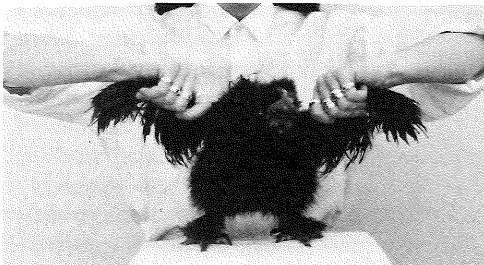
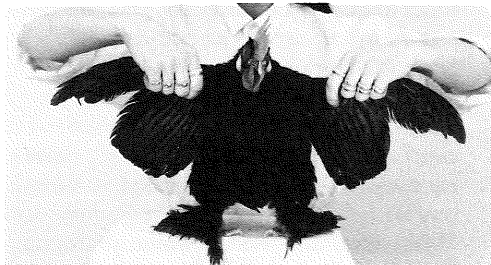
Broadway Window The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York May 7 – August 15, 1993

Andrea Zittel's *Breeding Unit for Reassigning Flight* is a kind of Nautilus machine for the chicken coop, dedicated to a rigorous program for physical conditioning. The features of this sleek habitat are designed to breed chickens of a certain stock, not the usual, earth-bound creatures but ones with stronger and bigger wings that can take flight. Presented as part of *The Final Frontier*, simultaneously on view in The New Museum's main gallery, Zittel's project addresses the exhibition's main theme concerning the role of the body in relation to rapidly evolving technologies. The exhibition examines the domain of the physical

with the nests becoming progressively higher, so that successive generations of chickens are selectively bred to have wings of greater and greater strength. Here, the breeding of chickens conforms to a hierarchical order that is analogous to both evolutionary theory and standard laboratory practice.

Zittel's experiment humorously highlights aspects of science that are usually glossed over within scientific discourse: science's promotion of ideas of progress based on the application of certain classification systems and, thus, its investment in concepts not only of class difference but

and the conservators who aim to retain qualities they admire.² Employing biology as an art media, Zittel raises questions about the visionary claims and revolutionary zeal underlying such creative pursuits in both science and art. Experiments in breeding and genetic engineering parallel the utopian aspirations of certain artists and art movements, such as those of the Russian avant-garde of the 1910s and 20s who sought to democratize and, in a sense, engineer social relations through art. Both advance a vision of progress to lay claim to the body politic—biological or social. Interestingly, Zittel's



Three examples of wing development in bantams, 1993

and organic, which have become increasingly subject to technological mediation and intervention. Combining techniques of animal husbandry with those of reproductive engineering, Zittel highlights the methodology at work in such burgeoning fields as biotechnology. As with other artists in *The Final Frontier*, Zittel suggests a reconfiguration of terms, telling in their linguistic collapse, in which biology and technology have become inextricably entwined.

Breeding Unit for Reassigning Flight uses simple means to achieve radical ends. Although the piece appears to be a mock science experiment, Zittel, who has researched her subject extensively, designed the unit for actual use in chicken breeding experiments. The unit is divided into four chambers, each containing a set of vertically stacked nests in which chickens can lay their eggs. The eggs occupying the top nest, the uppermost echelon in a chamber, are channeled into an incubator in the next chamber to hatch. Thus, only chickens with the strongest wings, those that are able to reach the highest nest, are allowed to reproduce. This scheme is repeated across the four chambers,

racial and sexual difference as well.¹ Employing this paradigm in a lab setup for an organism that might be actually bred, Zittel's work functions to graphically demonstrate scientific techniques or technologies as the instrument through which difference is engineered. By applying this approach to an idiosyncratic aim—after all, the need for chickens with stronger wings is debatable—Zittel at the same time calls into question the construction of difference through technology as a subjective, value-laden enterprise.

While Zittel's project speaks to the role of science and technology in our society, it also has provocative implications for concepts of art. As one breeding specialist has explained,

breeders are artists — sculpting dogs by manipulating their genes; they are not reproducing an individual dog, but trying to produce a dog that may never have existed, or to recover an old type that they fear is being lost. Dedicated breeders are often divided between the futurists who wish to modernize their breed,

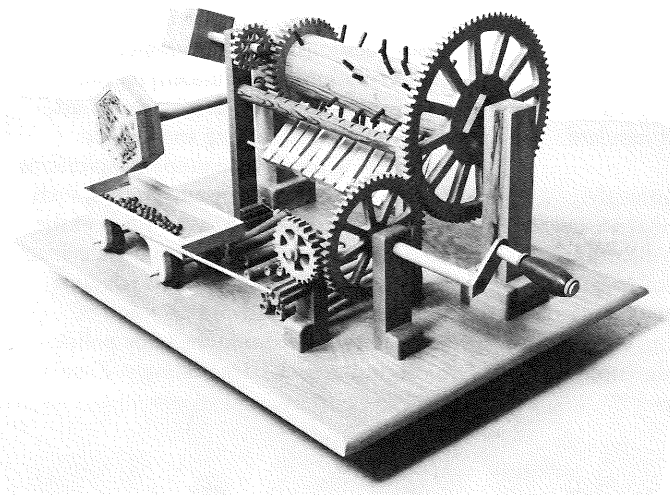
breeding unit, built of birch and steel, adopts sleek architectural lines reminiscent of the Russian modernists. In her project, however, art and creation tread more closely than ever on life, mirroring developments in biotechnology. As Zittel has said: "Creation is a form of ownership. Breeding is the ultimate form of ownership: the property is life."³

Alice Yang
Assistant Curator

1. This idea was discussed in an early draft of Lisa Cartwright's essay for *The Final Frontier* exhibition brochure. My thanks to her for sharing her insights.
2. Patricia Gail Burnham, "Pure-bred Dogs," *American Kennel Gazette*, May 1990, quoted in Benjamin Weil, "Areas of Investigation," *Purple Prose*, autumn 1992, p. 30.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Kazumi Tanaka

WorkSpace The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York May 7 – August 15, 1993



Kazumi Tanaka, *Sound maker*, 1991

The intimate, delicate, and exquisitely crafted sculptural works of Kazumi Tanaka, made out of fragile materials such as wood, paper, and bamboo, explore the artist's personal memories of her earlier life in Japan. Reflecting as well on the cultural differences and complexities of living in the Western world, Tanaka reveals her individual, private concerns through the narrative structure of her pieces. These narratives incorporate elements of pure fiction while at the same time they emanate from the artist's own personal history.

"Autobiography," writes Walter Benjamin, "has to do with time, with sequence, and with what makes up the continuous flow of life."¹ This involves a kind of space that, while connected as a whole, is "made up of moments and discontinuities."² For Kazumi Tanaka, the recollection of her past memories began six years ago when, at the age of 25, she moved from Japan to the United States. Confronted by two vastly different cultures, she sought to reconcile her contradictory experiences by using autobiographical elements in her work. She also began to study the complex tradition of Japanese carpentry used mostly in the construction of houses and to incorporate this craft in her work. For Tanaka, the slow and intricate process of fabricating her sculptures is significant not only in the extraordinary skills required, but also in how stories,

dreams, and recollections emerge from the work process. This process is akin to keeping a journal or diary, filled with daily mundane thoughts, dreams, and activities. Everyday occupations like sleeping, eating, getting sick, or listening to the rain become the source material she uses to communicate both the complexity and simplicity of her experience as a displaced person.

Although at first glance intricate craftsmanship is often the

most compelling aspect of Tanaka's work, poetry is at the heart of her memories and stories. *Sound maker*, for example, is an elaborate construction that the viewer activates by turning a wooden handle to create a sound the artist compares to rain. It is inspired by her auditory memory of rain falling on the stone-carved roof of her house in Osaka. The actual sound, she says, is always different from its memory: for her it is always about time and dreams. The emotional environment of the work reflects a meditative calm along with an elasticity of time, similar to one experienced on the grounds of Zen temples.

In *Eat as much as you want*, the artist recounts a story which comments on the subtle cultural differences found in simple daily rituals one encounters in a new country like eating. The work takes the form of a small table with a black tablecloth. On the table is a glass plate, lit from below, with a real cake and the words: "When we were kids, our parents bought us rabbits. One was black, the other was white. The white one lived four days, the black one lived five days. They died because we overfed them. I realized that if you love things too much, you can often kill them." This childhood memory surfaced when the artist first began living in America and became ill. Tanaka realized it was because the food she was eating was different from her usual Japanese diet.

The stories and experiences that Tanaka recounts in her work are humble, discrete activities that take place in the solitude of the home. This set of activities "transcends our memories of all the houses in which we have found shelters, above and beyond all the houses we have dreamed we lived in...the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."³ Through the miniature door in *I*, we are able to enter the space of her childhood memories. She entices us into a magical world, like that of Alice in Wonderland, which the artist also enters and leaves, sometimes to find refuge and sometimes to escape the anxieties of the world.

Nest is a tiny bird's nest meticulously fabricated from metal needles, constructed as prickly and dangerous outside but soft and safe inside. Here, again, a sense of comfort and refuge is created to help relive memories of protection. Through dreams, says Bachelard, we travel to the land of "Motionless Childhood," where we live on "fixations of happiness."⁴ A nest is life-giving and we often talk of our homes as a nest. This image of rest and quiet attracts our attention, "for not only do we come back to it, but we dream of coming back to it."⁵

Tanaka often executes her complex works without tools. Slowly, patiently knotting the wires, shaving the wood, interweaving the metal needles like a bird, her tool is her own body. Similar to the form that some female birds create by molding the inside of the nest with their round bodies, Tanaka's work builds shape from the inside out. This particular nest is a fragile, precarious thing which urges us to daydream and suggests a longing for security and comfort. Tanaka's works mine her own private memories to share with us the delicate, simple, and often painful experiences of her life.

France Morin
Senior Curator

1. Quoted in Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1991), p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
3. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 3, 6.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Nari Ward

New Work Gallery The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York May 7 – August 15, 1993

Nari Ward's installation *Carpet Angel* asserts an overwhelming physical presence while simultaneously embodying the immateriality of the spiritual. Taking the shape of a wingspan which is both massive and weightless, as if to suggest the flight of discarded materials, this installation addresses the here and now and the thereafter.

Raised a Baptist in Kingston, Jamaica, Ward uses biblical references as a resource and motivational force in his work. Just as the parables of the Bible serve to illustrate religious principles for an easier understanding of the Christian faith, Ward uses discarded, commonplace materials, enabling viewers to make a direct connection to the work. Accessibility is promoted through the use of the mundane, the familiar, and the everyday. Dispossessed objects, found in vacant lots, are redeemed as raw material for Ward's sculptural works. The current installation, *Carpet Angel*, is composed of a carpet runner, carpet remnants, plastic bags, plastic bottles, and springs, odds and ends which are easily identifiable and carry with them a distinct set of references, ideas, and memories for each viewer.

Here, evoking the figure (both celestial and corporeal), a nest of cylindrical shapes lies dormant beneath the airy, angelic form which hovers above, as if to signal renewed life. The suspended web-like figure is laboriously woven together by an infinite number of screws and knots, whose counterpart below consists of an abundance of circular forms made from rolled carpet remnants and plastic bottles, and fastened together by an endless series of screws. What emerges from this repetitive and labor-intensive treatment is a handmade, homemade quality familiar to the folk art tradition.

The use of materials in *Carpet Angel* recalls the folk art of quilting by African-American women during slavery. Through the recollection of her own grandmother's quilting, writer bell hooks highlights the sacred quality of this folk tradition:

To her, quilting was a spiritual process where one learned surrender. It was a form of meditation where the self was let go. This was the way she had learned to approach quilting from her mother. To her it was an art of

stillness and concentration, a work which renewed the spirit.¹

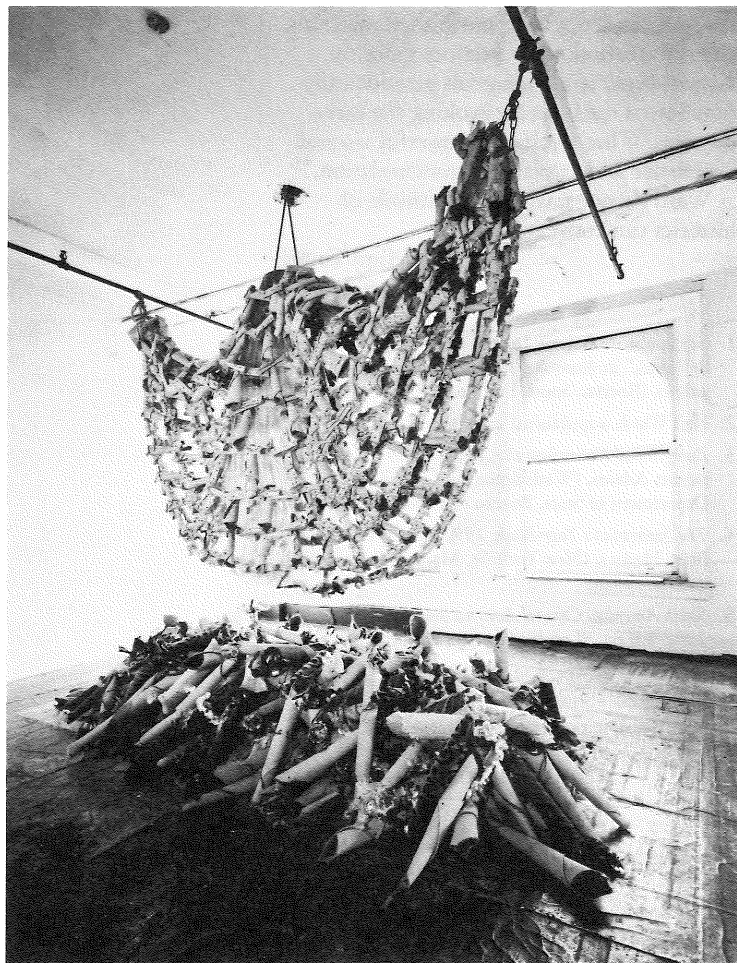
How both these traditional "crazy" quilts and Ward's sculptural forms are crafted, reveal a participation in a kind of devotional activity. Ward diligently works and reworks plastic bags, bottles, carpet, and other items, manipulating them with a similar intensity of spirit. In fact, Ward conceives of *Carpet Angel* as a kind of offering² through the literal presence of converted and transformed waste materials, and symbolically, through its painstaking creation.

Cultural tradition and personal memory also inform Ward's methods of working. A tradition developed in Jamaica for creating makeshift utilitarian objects using "found" materials to compensate for the lack of resources available for most Jamaicans to obtain basic commodities. Discussing a recent trip back to Jamaica in the summer of 1992, Ward affectionately recalled how tires from common push-carts were reconstructed. The damaged tires were cut into strips and wrapped around ball bearings, creating new tires. Used rubber was recycled as raw material in order to recreate a functional wheel.

Jamaican culture has traditionally embraced hybridization in every aspect of life. Composed of people of African, Afro-European, Chinese, Afro-Chinese, East Indian, Afro-East Indian, and European descent, among others,³ Jamaica is hardly new to concepts of

assimilation and adaptation. Diversity also continues within religious life where Christian denominations ranging from Anglican, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Moravian to Quaker, to name only a few, exist side by side with the non-Christian religions of Hindus, Jews, Moslems, Bahai followers, and Rastafarians.⁴

Up until the 1950s and 1960s, Jamaica was largely agricultural. It was a country born out of a slave plantation society, where slavery legally ended in 1834.⁵ In the 1950s, industrialization forced Jamaicans to come to terms with two seemingly irreconcilable ways of life, effecting a dialogue between the agrarian and the urban.⁶ It is this kind of harmonization among a multitude of influences and conditions which characterizes Jamaican culture.



Nari Ward, *Carpet Angel*, 1992

Carpet Angel retraces this sensibility through the redemption of throwaway materials from the immediate urban environment in much the same way that early African-American quiltmakers relied on fabric remnants and old clothing as material for their quilts. Just as the fabrics taken from a former dress or suit are inscribed with the memory of the individual who wore it, Ward's selection of refuse from the city streets is imprinted with the history of the materials' former use.

Carpet Angel also functions as a kind of mapping of the urban landscape and a reference to its cycles of life and decay. Living off the land, scavenging available materials, is as familiar to the homeless in urban America as it is to the inhabitants of the shantytowns of Jamaica. Ward's installation reinvests these waste products with new potential through the transcendence of impoverished materials and the creation of a revelatory space. In *Carpet Angel*, crude materials paradoxically function as the basis for evoking the metaphysical. What results is a powerful visceral experience and "a place of contemplation,"⁷ as Ward suggests, where a multitude of histories can converge.

Mimi Young
Curatorial Intern

1. bell hooks, "Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand," in *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 116.
2. Nari Ward, unpublished artist's statement, 1993.
3. *Background Notes: Jamaica*, February 1990, ed. Juanita Adams, (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs), p. 1.
4. *The Statesman's Year-Book: 1992-93*, 129th ed., ed. Brian Hunter, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), p. 832.
5. *South America, Central America and the Caribbean, 1991*, 3rd ed., (London: Europa Publications, Ltd., 1990), p. 370.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 371-372.
7. Nari Ward, unpublished artist's statement, 1993.

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